Melancholia

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by karinakamichi

Summary

Team 7 has issues, severe issues. But when Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto start unraveling and a secret gets revealed, it starts to seem like it's not just them anymore, but Kakashi too, and numerous others with psychological scars of the past. Question is: Will they ever manage to truly work out their problems?

Dad!Iruka Dad!Kakashi. Mom!Tsunade. Eventual Light NaruSaku (Not as a main focus). Canon Divergence where Sasuke doesn't leave the village. Various topics to be discussed.

- Translation into Русский available: Меланхолия by 68_Omicron_Ceti

Prologue

Story: Melancholia
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Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

…

Blood was everywhere.

Corpses were scattered all throughout the area.

His family. Everybody was dead.

His mother and father too.

Itachi was there.

He'd killed them all.

He had seen it happen over and over again.

"You are not even worth killing. Little brother, you're pathetic. If you want to kill me, settle for hating me… Hate me and live… like the coward you are! Clinging to life without honor! And someday, when you have the same eyes as I… You will find me again."

Sasuke woke up in a cold sweat, feeling bile rising to his throat. Immediately he rushed to the bathroom emptying what little contents he had on his stomach.

It was that same dream again.

It had been two weeks since his fight with Naruto on the hospital roof and they'd barely spoken since. Sakura was clearly becoming uncomfortable with the whole situation and Kakashi didn't really seem to know how to diffuse things all that better.

Ever since his recent run-in with Itachi, since he'd made him re-experience that night yet again, the nightmares had resurfaced. He'd barely been able to eat at all, let alone sleep, living with a constant reminder that he would always be in his brother's shadow, as his father used to say.

Naruto, meanwhile, just kept getting stronger. How…? Just what was he? He used to be the weakest one in class and now, so many people were surprised by his growth. *He was supposed to be the deadlast! The loser!*

The knowledge of the blonde haired idiot managing to defeat Gaara when he himself couldn't burned in his memory, the recollection of Itachi saying his interest was solely in Naruto… That he was still weak… That he still didn't have enough hatred… It made him want to scream.

Letting the urge get the best of him, he acted without thinking, slamming his fist into a nearby mirror, shattering it into a thousand pieces and drawing blood.

"Dammit…!"

…

"I don't know why you keep on bothering with the ninja stuff. You're really not cut out to be a Shinobi. You can't even follow basic tasks at home, and you rarely ever actually listen to what I have to say."

"No, the problem is you never listen to what I have to say! Neither of you-!"

"Don't you dare put the blame on me! You're the one who needs to get your life together, Sakura, or you'll never find somebody who'll tolerate you."

"Oh, I have plenty of people! You and dad the only ones who ever seem to have an issue with me considering how you're constantly putting me down! I don't need you ruling my life and telling me what to do with it!"

"Sakura, get back here! I'm not through with talking to you!"

"Well, I *am*!"

This was a typical morning for the Harunos. Sakura's mother undermining her potential and discrediting her accomplishments, Sakura shouting back, the argument escalating before Sakura finally huffed off in a tizzy slamming the door behind her.

Except, this time, she didn't expect to get slapped when she pointed out that her parents didn't understand her. She reached up to feel the sensitive and most certainly red spot on her cheek, trying to ignore the angry tears welling up in her eyes. Why was it always like this between them? Why couldn't they just get along? Why couldn't her mom try at least once to look at somebody else's side of view? Why couldn't her dad actually take initiative and do something about it for once?

Back when she had been dealing with bullying in school, it was Ino who helped her through her insecurities, and the situation, not her parents. And Sasuke, Naruto, Kakashi and some others like Lee, had been through thick and thin with and for her after she started on her path. Yet Mebuki always kept acting like she had always been there for her. She may have raised her, and for that Sakura was grateful, but the woman… She didn't understand a single thing

about her when it came down to it and she was always acting like nobody else would possibly ever "care" about her.

"Ugh… She makes me so mad…!"

To be honest, though, all of her relationships were in shambles right now in. Team 7, for instance, wasn't anything like what it used to be. Ever since Orochimaru had come into the picture, Sasuke had slowly been becoming more and more consumed with bitterness and an inferiority complex, jealousy over Naruto. And now he seemed more intent than ever on getting revenge over his family. According to Kakashi, he'd had a run-in with Itachi and his eyes were colder than ever now.

He and Naruto weren't getting along well at all, and Sakura felt torn between the two. Even though she had a mother and father, Team 7 was more like a family to her than they'd ever been. She hated to say it, but it was the truth. But she felt at a loss of what to do. She wanted them to stop fighting and just go back to the way it used to be. Kakashi said things would get better, but from what she could tell, they hadn't made much progress at all.

Plus, Naruto… had kind of seemed aloof himself lately as well. He was still outgoing, but there was often a look in his eyes that gave the impression that something was bothering him, perhaps even aside from the situation with Sasuke. Just… what was happening to them…? What were they becoming…?

…

"It's that boy…"

"He should know he's not welcome around here."

"I still don't know why the Hokage allowed him to become a ninja…"

"Mom, why is everybody afraid of him?"

"It doesn't matter, we should get out of here…"

These were things that Naruto was all too used to hearing. The harsh whispers, the glares. Ever since Orochimaru had attacked the village, everybody had been on edge more so than usual. There were some people who had been inspired by his fight with Neji during the Chuunin Exams and some who had been amazed by the rumors of his defeat of Gaara, sure, but there were still plenty of people that hated him for the demon inside of him.

And even though he pretended to not notice them, the fresh bandages underneath his sleeves and the self-inflicted slashes and scars on his forearms was proof enough of his suffering. It was something he had only recently started, but he had nearly made it a daily habit, because it helped ease some of the anxiety just like when it consequently had when he had stabbed his hand with the kunai on the journey to the Land of Waves to get the poison out of his blood. And his injuries healed pretty quickly for him anyway so it wasn't that big of an issue.

Of course, he was fully aware that Sakura, Kakashi, Tsunade and many others would certainly not approve of it, but it wasn't like he was trying to die or anything. He just… needed a release sometimes and this was the best thing that had worked for him so far.

He barely held back a curse when some drunk person bumped into him.

"Watch where you're going, you lil' shit…!" The man slurred, before he looked back, his eyes widening. "Oh, it's you… *The fox brat*."

Technically, people weren't supposed to talk about that, but now, since the Sandaime, who had passed the law in the first place, was dead, very little would stop citizens like this from speaking their mind.

Naruto tried his best to keep a straight face, but failed miserably, letting his emotions get the best of him. "Got a problem?"

The man chugged a sip of his whiskey or whatever alcoholic beverage he had in the bottle in his hand. "Why, yeahhh, I do…"

He moved up to get close enough to spit in Naruto's face, his breath stinking to high heaven. "You may think yer some big shot af'er defeatin' the Hyuuga kid and that sand ninja, but you haven't convinced me of nothin'. There may be some people in this village who respects you now, but I'll never dream of acknowledging you. *Once a demon, always a demon.*"

In that moment, a part of Naruto wanted to beat the crap out of the drunk man, but the other part knew he would only feel worse if he got into a fight with a defenseless civilian. Plus, Tsunade or somebody else would probably only end up fussing him out over it.

Not to mention… It would prove what the man said to be true, so, with that thought in mind, he allowed the drunkard to push him to the side and swagger off.

He'd already been having enough issues with Sasuke, with his team falling apart, this was the last thing he needed at the moment.

So, pushing aside the matter of his itching arm, the desire to rip his skin to pieces yet again, he tried to ignore the glances he was receiving from the civilians and rushed on ahead towards the bridge to meet up with his teammates at.

…

Kakashi stood before Obitio's grave, reflecting on the past.

He had dealt with a lot of loss over his life time. His mother died when she gave birth to him. His father committed suicide when he was a young boy. He had lost Obito, Rin ran into his Chidori, he lost his sensei in the Nine Tails Attack, and he grew up during a time of war and strife, the struggle was unspeakable. Sometimes, he felt like the depression and guilt was too much to bear, but when Sakura, Sasuke and Naruto became his students, he had began to feel better, they gave him a hope for a better turn out. He saw the potential in them and they quickly became very important to him.

Unfortunately, they also started to served as reminder sometimes, of his own failures, especially as of late. Even though they were different in many ways… Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke reminded him of Obito, Rin and himself so much so it sometimes hurt. And the fact that their team was falling apart to this extent... He would lying if he said it didn't scare him.

After all, it wasn't like Kakashi didn't understand where they were coming from at all. He just wished… that things could go back to normal. As it was, nobody seemed themselves lately, and the negativity was wearing down on him just as it was them.

Well, that *was* part of being a teacher, he supposed. And in all honestly, he wouldn't trade that away for anything. Besides, he was sure things would get better eventually. They just needed a motivator…

A mission would probably be good for them.

…

End of Prologue

…

A/N: I hope this looks good so far... There wasn't a lot of focus on Kakashi, but I promise I'll give some more insight later.

Also, this will likely end up as some light NaruSaku, because I have a lot of nostalgia for it growing up, even though I also really like SasuSaku and (don't kill me) SasuNaru… Although pairings will not be a huge focus at all. This is mostly a gen/family fic.

This is pretty much set in manga-canon alone, minus for the thing with Sakura's parents in RTN, which Kishimoto originally had the idea to go with but SJ suggested against it.

A lot of things in this story will be based on personal experiences so please ignore me and my unhealthy projection.

Still not certain what to do with Itachi though...

Bruise

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.
Note: This chapter may seem SasuSakuish in some ways, but that wasn't the purpose behind it at all. This is meant as friendship more than anything. And considering this is going to be eventual NaruSaku, I don't want to do too much baiting for other pairings(even mutually canon ones). Even NaruSaku is gonna be slow build and the story is gonna be putting the most focus on Team 7 in general and those closest to them, like Tsunade, Shikamaru, Ino, Jiraiya, and the like. Also thinking of bringing in Gaara later too. :D

If y'all have any suggestions, that'd be great too. (Also, thank you so much for the Kudos. They mean a lot! :D)

Replies to Reviews:

WheelOfDawn on Chapter 1:

"Oh this seems like a great start to a story! Looking forward to more chapters!"

I hope you stick through this with me to the end!

...

Sasuke was the first one to arrive at the bridge. It was still pretty early though, so nothing surprising there. Hands in his pocket, he took a moment to look down at his reflection in the water beneath him. Immediately after, however, he scoffed, turning away. It seemed everything served as an unwelcome reminder of Itachi to him anymore, especially his own resemblance of his Older Brother.

He sat down, leaning against the railing of the bridge. Looking up, he took a long moment to take in the vibrant array of orange, red, and purple in the sky. And for just a little while, the

aesthetic pleasing sight actually seemed to calm his nerves. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before his thoughts once again began to go rampant, ruining his mood entirely.

"You still don't have enough hatred…"

Itachi's haunting voice echoed in his head for the thousandth time that week, giving him a sickening reminder of his lack of progress. Over the course of the past few weeks, he'd been training non-stop, but he knew it wasn't enough, it would *never* be enough.

Revenge was what he had devoted his very life to at this point, it was supposed to be his only purpose, so why wasn't he strong enough yet? What had he been doing all this time? *What was it all for? Had he-*

"Good morning, Sasuke-kun." His teammate's voice interrupted his thoughts, drawing him out of his trance. He looked up, jumping a bit, startled by their close-proximity. He tried to ignore the heat in his face at the awkwardness when he saw her smile, turning away.

"Morning." He muttered.

"Took you long enough." Sakura said, lightly scolding him. Sasuke had been so distant lately. She was honestly surprised to even get *that* much of out of him. "I called out to you a moment ago, but you didn't even hear me."

He then glanced back up to notice a bruise on her cheek as she stood back. The placing of it was kind of peculiar. Had somebody hit her? Something welled up inside of him, making it impossible to just ignore. Without a second thought, he casually asked, "What happened to you…?"

It took a moment for Sakura to realize he was referring to her cheek, because he rarely ever voiced concerns for his teammates, but she was quick to dismiss it. Such a thing shouldn't have to be of concern to Sasuke or any of the others. They already had plenty of other things to worry about themselves anyway. "Oh this? It's nothing, really. I just had an accident earlier is all."

Sakura cursed herself. That act probably wouldn't have even fooled Naruto.

Naturally, Sasuke seemed even more suspicious at this point, but, much to her gratitude, he decided to drop the subject.

"Anyway…, you seemed like you were pretty deep in thought about something. Is there…" Sakura, who had sat down next to him and noticed his wounded fist, trailed off into a momentary silence, trying to think of the best way to broach the subject. She wanted more than anything for Sasuke to open up to her or at least *somebody* for once. He always kept people at a distance, and lately he'd seemed even distancing than ever. "…something bothering you…? If there is, you know you can talk to me, right?"

Sasuke almost seemed surprised for a moment, but looked away. He had no reason to get her involved with his problems. "…It's nothing to concern yourself with… Just focus on yourself, Sakura…"

His tone almost sounded cold, but it was not completely decipherable, so Sakura couldn't tell if Sasuke was just saying that as a means to get her off his back or if he genuinely was saying that because he wanted her to focus on her own problems instead of stressing herself out more. Maybe it was both.

"Mn…" She looked down at her folded arms. Why was Sasuke always so stubborn…? Why did he never let others in about anything? Naruto wasn't any better either. Both of them were always pushing themselves to their limit, and keeping her at a distance. She wanted to be there for them and help them through their problems, but they always told her to not worry and pushed her away. Even Kakashi… He hadn't wanted to get her involved with the matter about the mark on Sasuke's neck despite her concern.

She gave a small sigh but decided to push the matter aside for the time being.

"Naruto should be arriving soon… I bet Kakashi-sensei will probably be late as ever, though..." Sakura assumed, absentmindedly.

…

" There may be some people in this village who respects you now, but I'll never dream of acknowledging you. Once a demon, always a demon . "

Naruto had tried so hard to simply forget the drunken man's statement, but receiving further glares and whispers since then had only reinforced what he had said, and his spiteful words kept echoing in his head. He had slowed his pace at this point, holding a hand up to his stomach, looking everywhere but at the crowd around him, and their judgmental eyes. He suddenly felt nauseated.

Considering how open people were being about their feelings towards him right now… What would happen if Sakura and Sasuke found out that he had the Nine Tailed Fox inside of him? Would they hate him? Most people would…

And he was sure they already had an inkling that there was something different about him, considering how he had released the Nine Tail's chakra in the Forest of Death, during the Chuunin exams in his fight with Neji, and especially during his fight with Gaara. Even if Sakura didn't suspect anything at this point, Sasuke *definitely* did.

There was already enough tension between them at the moment, Sasuke finding out that he had a literal demon inside of him would probably only make him hate him even more. Despite how much they fought and butted heads, Naruto thought of him as not only his rival, but also his *friend*, and being hated by him… That was the last thing he ever wanted. In fact, it was the opposite. More than anything, He wanted his *acknowledgement*, to be respected by him, not shunned by him.

And Sakura too… He valued her opinions of him so much it hurt sometimes. She did occasionally scold him for various things… Often, he didn't know what she thought of him, and, in the beginning, she clearly used to not like him that much at all, but they *had* become much closer over the past year, so the thought of her *genuinely* hating him or being disgusted by him… it terrified him to his very core.

For that matter, he clung to the opinions of *both* of his teammates(even Kakashi), more than he would have ever liked to admit.

He sighed. No use overthinking it, he supposed. It looked like he'd just have to deal with it when or if it came to that. There was no use worrying over it now, or at least that's what he tried to tell himself in a poor attempt to soothe his anxieties.

He looked up to see his teammates sitting on the bridge, and ran over, with a large, partially fake, smile. "Morning, Sakura-chan!"

"Morning." Sakura responded, looking up, and right after, Naruto took note of the bruise on his face and grew defensive, jumping to conclusions.

"What happened to your face? Don't tell me… Sasuke-teme, what did you do to her!?" He was immediately ready to start a fight.

Sasuke immediately glared at him over the accusation, and Sakura jumped up to diffuse the situation. Normally, Naruto probably wouldn't have blindly blamed Sasuke, but it could be said that the tension between them as of late was almost solely enough for him to base his suspicions off of, and Sasuke's injured fist didn't help reduce his concern in the slightest.

"Hold on, Naruto!" Sakura stepped in between them, keeping Naruto back from attacking Sasuke before he got too close. "He isn't the one who did it! He had nothing to do with it. So, please, calm down…!"

"But Sakura-chan…" Naruto stopped resisting after a minute. He desperately wanted to do something about her injury, but decided to trust Sakura. If she said Sasuke wasn't the one who did it, then he had to believe her.

Sasuke gave her a suspicious look. "*Earlier, she claimed it was an accident, but just now… She almost seemed to imply somebody was behind it…"*

Despite his questions, he decided to not probe the subject, instead turning his attention to Naruto.

"Hn. It'd serve you well to think things through instead of jumping to conclusions next time. *Dobe*." Sasuke muttered, emphasizing the last part to express his irritation.

"What was *that*?" Naruto demanded, giving into the provocation.

"Both of you-" Sakura started to say, but was cut off by Sasuke.

"Hard of hearing? Do I have spell it out for you? You *were* always pretty slow in the Academy." he glared.

"Okay, that does it, I-" Naruto started to advance towards Sasuke, who had stood up, fully ready to take their dispute to the next level.

"Stop arguing already!" Sakura shouted this time, cutting Naruto off, and startling both of them. She bit her lip before continuing. "We're supposed to be a team, aren't we?! We're

friends…!”

A family, she wanted to say, but held back. “What good has fighting each other *ever* done for us?!”

They all had their own family issues, and she was all too used to arguments like she had with her blood-related family, but there was no reason Team 7 should have to go downhill as well.

Naruto and Sasuke both grew silent after that. Deep down, they knew she was right.

“Neither you nor I can be called lucky... That's for sure. But we're not the most unfortunate either. You and I both have found precious friends, haven't we?”

Kakashi’s words to Sasuke from weeks prior echoed in his head, reaffirming the point Sakura had just made. Since Sasuke’s family had been massacred, Team 7 had become the closest and most important bond he’d had in years, and he never wanted to risk losing that again.

And to Naruto, who hadn’t had a family or any friends growing up… Aside from being acknowledged by Iruka, becoming a part of Team 7 was probably the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Team 7… It wasn’t something *any* of them wanted to lose.

Naruto smiled after a bit. “…Yeah! You’re right, Sakura-chan…! We have to stick together no matter what!”

“Right.” Sakura smiled a bit herself.

Sasuke ‘tch’ed, but it was hard to tell if he was being sarcastic or not. Sakura wanted to believe that Sasuke got the message. Yet it was still hard to tell, and this likely wouldn’t be the end of this matter.

For a long time, nobody said anything. The sun had rose, and it was long past the time Kakashi was supposed to have arrived.

“He’s late…” Naruto growled.

“What else is new…?” Sakura muttered sarcastically.

“Where the hell is he already…? I’m tired of waiting!” Naruto started going into a tangent. He had to distract himself and hearing his own voice was honestly better than sitting and doing nothing. It was especially better than being left alone with the thoughts in his head that made him want to rip his arms to shreds.

“It’s not like complaining is going to make him appear any faster, so keep it down, you idiot…!” Sakura sighed, making it clear she too was on the verge of losing her own patience. Besides, they could probably get in trouble if he continued making so much racket.

“But Sakura-chan….! I-”

In that moment, Kakashi appeared in a cloud of smoke, holding up a hand and eye-smiling.“Yo.”

“You’re late!” Both Naruto and Sakura shouted in unison, accusingly pointing a finger at him, all politeness gone from both parties. Sasuke was clearly irritated as well, but opted to stay silent.

“Sorry about that…” Kakashi caved a bit, pretending to not notice the bruise on Sakura’s cheek, or the wounds on Sasuke’s knuckles. “You see, there was an old lady who-“

“Just can it with the lies already!” Sakura shouted, in irritation.

“Yeah, just hurry up and give us our mission already!” Naruto stomped a bit, his fists pumped.

Kakashi barely held back the urge to chuckle. Despite everything, this was still his team…

“Patience, Naruto. The mission details will be relayed to you through Lady Fifth. I came to let you three know to meet be at her office in fifteen minutes. Don’t be late.”

With that, Kakashi poofed away.

“’*Don’t be late’*.” Naruto mocked, folding his arms and pouting. “Says the person who made us wait two hours past the arrival time... He should have just told us that before…”

Sasuke chose not to voice his agitation. “Let’s just go…”

“I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind when I see him later. That’ll show-“ Naruto started to say but was interrupted when Sakura grabbed his arm, pulling him along.

“Quit fussing and come on...” She scolded, a bit surprised when she heard him hiss as if she’d hurt him. She certainly hadn’t grabbed him that hard, had she?

“What’s wrong now? Don’t tell me that hurt.” Sakura scoffed and rose an eyebrow, giving him a suspicious look, alongside Sasuke.

Naruto felt a wave of nausea rise in his stomach. No matter what, nobody could find out about his habit, especially not Sakura or Sasuke. Normally, he’d be all for physical contact with Sakura, but there was just too much of a risk involved at this time.

“N-no, it’s nothing like that, Sakura-chan.” he lied sheepishly. “You just surprised me is all.”

Sakura didn’t know if she entirely believed that but decided to ignore her whim, changing the subject.

“If it’s nothing, then hurry it up already. We don’t have all day.” Sakura rushed him, tightening her grip around his arm above his sleeve, ever so slightly pulling him along with her.

“I know, I know… You don’t have to be so rough, Sakura-chan…” Naruto playfully wined, causing Sakura to let out a sigh. Sasuke too, had long since push his brief suspicion to the side.

A sense of nostalgia hit them all in that moment. This… It somehow felt right. This is how it was supposed to be.

And something deep inside of them, hoped that maybe, just maybe, everything would work out for the best.

Or… Things could get much much worse.

…

A/N: This took me forever, and I’m super worried that this was out of character or something. It’s been at least five years or so since I wrote anything for Naruto, and I only just got back into the fandom, finally finished Shippuden. I haven’t seen part one of the anime in a long time, but I went and recently read the first part of the manga before the time skip and I thought it was really good. Plus, Sakura’s actually not that bad at all in the manga, or at least there isn’t nearly as much slapstick in the manga as there is in the anime, and you can tell she genuinely cares for her teammates. Not that the anime is bad, but there were quite a few added scenes that, in my opinion, actually put Sakura in more of a negative light than the manga did. Like the anime scene after she thinks she should be nicer to Naruto, where she got mad at Naruto for running off… That scene wasn’t in the manga(and honestly I’m glad because that was where she was meant to start developing into a kinder person who isn’t just about Sasuke.) But please don’t misunderstand. The Naruto anime was my childhood, it’s the first anime I ever watched and I saw it at like seven years old, so it will always hold a very special place in my heart. One of my purposes of this story is just to explore in further depth the human parts of their characterizations that was touched on in both the manga and the anime, as well as extra stuff that I haven’t properly been able to go into before with previous Naruto stories. I’ve gotten much better at writing(at least I think so), and I hope that people will genuinely support me on this to the end. J

Chapter 3

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 3
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.
Note: Just a heads up, Sakura's slapstick 'abuse' isn't gonna exist like it does in canon, or rather it won't be nearly as harsh or frequent as it's portrayed in the anime or even the manga, but I figured I might as well have a small smack every now and then, but it will NOT be any harder than normal friends and siblings/parents flick their friend's/relative's forehead or smack a child's hand for being rude or disobeying orders. Just very light innocent smacks, once in a while, not every chapter. However, if you think I shouldn't do it, I'm completely fine with removing it entirely.)

Also, I really really hope this doesn't seem rushed or anything.

Replies to Reviews.

WheelOfDawn on Chapter 2 Said:

"They don't seem out of character to me, just seem a bit deeper with more logical issues for how they're lives have gone. I'm really surprised in the series how they Didn't bring depression and anxiety into how naruto is, as I think that treatment would get to everyone. Looking forward to more!"

I always wished they would go into that more too, and things about depression and anxiety is what I write best, so I figured it was about time I wrote something!

Lioness098 on Chapter 2 Said:

"I'm excited for more."

I hope you continue to enjoy it! :D

…

As Sasuke, Sakura and Naruto headed towards the Hokage's mansion, Sakura and Sasuke couldn't help but notice the harsh glances from random civilians that kept being directed at Naruto, who pretended to not notice it at all.

Why did everybody always look at him like that? They'd both noticed the glances and heard the whispers before on numerous occasions, but never said anything about it, because they figured it wasn't any of their business. Honestly, though, it was really starting to irk them. For one, it almost felt like the glances were being directed at them as well since they were with him.

Sakura began to think back to when Mebuki and Kizashi had told her on numerous occasions to avoid Naruto, just as many other parents had told their own children to do so without giving a clear reason. At the back of her mind, there was always a voice making her want to question why they treated him like he was some kind of plague. He may have pulled pranks before, and did sometimes do troublesome things, but he had never committed any crime that warranted being ostracized and hated by an entire village, right…?

Hell, for that matter, even though she herself never particularly cared about Naruto back in the academy, and thought of him as kind of a nuisance, she never *actually* hated him.

In fact, as of late, she had really found herself starting to grow closer to him, and she dare say, despite how much of a pain he could be sometimes, she *did* care about him.

"It's that kid…," She heard a woman mutter to her husband, with her child noticing the hostility. "He's the-"

"Yeah, we should get out of here…" The young man beside her nodded. *"Come on, Sora."*

"*Why? What's wrong, Mama? Papa? Who is he? Who is that boy…?"* The child asked confused as he was pulled off.

"That's none of your concern, sweetheart. Just don't look at him…" The mother responded in a seemingly pained voice, as she momentarily met Sakura's eyes.

Something rose inside of Sakura, and she almost had half a mind to say something, a sudden urge to chew the woman out consuming her. However, she decided that starting trouble wouldn't accomplish anything. Besides, they had to focus on getting to the Hokage to receive their mission. Getting into a fight… it wouldn't be worth it.

Sasuke himself wasn't any more comfortable about the whole situation than Sakura was, managing to scare off one lady with an irritated glare of his own, but he too decided it was best not to get involved. It wasn't really his problem, but nor was it theirs. They should just mind their own business already. How the hell was Naruto able to put up with all of this negative attention all of his childhood without going insane?

He looked over to his blond teammate. He didn't seem bothered in the slightest, but Sasuke knew all too well, as did Sakura, that he had to have been noticing their looks, surely. Naruto may have been dense but he wasn't that oblivious. All throughout Naruto's childhood, during the days in the academy, there had been times where Naruto actually spoke out against the people who had ostracized and belittled him.

So then why…? Why did he effortlessly keep up such a happy-go-lucky-expression?

Had he just… accepted this…?

Actually, now that he thought about it, it wasn't that surprising…

He briefly thought back to the days following the Uchiha Massacre.

There had been numerous glances of pity he'd received from others, non-stop whispers about Itachi and the whole situation revolving around it. It make him sick to listen to them, everything did, but he chose to ignore them, to pretend he didn't care what they were saying. It wasn't the same situation, of course, but he did understand it some.

And even before all that started, there had seemed to be a bit of tension between the Uchiha clan and other villagers. Over what, he didn't entirely understand - he was too young at the time - but he did sometimes pick up on the occasional hostility and glares directed at some of his love ones and even himself once in a while.

Now that he thought back to it… The cold looks Naruto received were similar to the glares his family had been getting. As he saw it now, however, he could tell all too easily that it wasn't just simple hatred involved, but some kind of fear as well.

But the Uchiha were one of the strongest clans in history, so naturally some hostility and fear directed at a clan like that made some sense in itself, but… their hatred for Naruto just didn't add up. Naruto wasn't a part of some famous clan and he certainly had no famous Kekkei Genkai or anything of the sort, so why would they…?

Suddenly, in a flash, he recalled the unidentified power Naruto had exhibited back in the Forest of Death and during his fight with Gaara. The image of Naruto's slit eyes and almost demonic facial features burned into his memories. The chakra that had been consuming him back then… It wasn't human…

Was there something Naruto had been hiding from them all along?

"I know he's the one you're really after…" Jiraiya's words to Itachi about Naruto echoed in his head.

"To take Naruto with us… is the supreme order given to us by the Akatsuki…" Itachi had said.

What was it his Brother wanted Naruto for? Did he… have some kind of secret power that had incurred the distrust of an entire village, even gaining the interest of an enemy organization?

Naruto… Just who are you…?

Sasuke shook the thoughts out of his head for the time being and focused on the Hokage Mansion in front of them.

Naruto was the first one to enter, immediately running down the hall, despite Sakura's protests. Naruto shoved open the door to the Hokage's office without even bothering to knock.

“Alright, Obachan! Time to give us our mission!” Naruto said bluntly, as he stormed in, pointing at Tsunade who was sitting at her desk. “And it better be a good one! Not one of those lame D-Rank missions!”

Kakashi, who was already there, looked up. He was about to say something, but before he could-

“You idiot…! You can’t just barge in like that and start barking demands at the Hokage…! Haven’t you heard of manners…?!” Sakura suddenly scolded him, having just caught up with him. She lightly smacked the back of his head, just hard enough to get the message across.

“Hey…! What’d you have to do that for, Sakura-chan…?!” Naruto whined, as if he hadn’t done anything wrong at all. It didn’t actually hurt, he was just being dramatic and childish. Sakura sighed, before bowing apologetically.

“I’m so sorry, Hokage-sama. He really didn’t mean to be so disrespectful. Naruto, apologize *now*…!” She demanded.

“Huh, why should I?!” Naruto shot back, bitterly.

“*Because I said so…!*” Sakura retorted.

Tsunade, meanwhile, couldn’t help but be amused by the whole situation, any irritation she initially had felt towards the boy gone. A smirk played on the corner of her lips, a bit of nostalgia hitting her.

This girl… She kind of reminds me of me when I was her age…

She then noticed the bruise on the girl’s cheek. Kakashi had mentioned his concern about it; that he thought Sasuke might have had something to do with it, so he had wanted her to take a look at it, but as such a high-level medical ninja, it only took but a brief glance at the injury on the Uchiha’s fist for her to deduce that he wasn’t the one responsible for hitting her, although it was pretty clear that *somebody* had. Both of the injuries clearly had different causation and were not connected, at the very least not directly.

“I’m *sorry*… There, are you *happy now*…?” Naruto pouted, sounding almost like a three year-old and dragging Tsunade out of her thoughts.

Sakura sighed again. Kakashi smiled nervously at Tsunade, scratching the back of his head.

“Sorry about that... I hope you can forgive them… I promise they mean no harm.” He said awkwardly.

“You too, Kakashi-sensei…?” Naruto grumbled beneath his breath, edging back a bit when he received an accusatory glance from his pink haired teammate.

“Well, it *is Naruto* we’re talking about, after all… ” Tsunade chuckled a bit, looking at the young boy, who’d quickly grown on her, with fondness. “I would be a fool if I didn’t let it slide just this *once*…”

“Haha… I suppose that’s true…” Kakashi laughed awkwardly, more grateful than ever for her lenience. Naruto *could* be a handful sometimes. Only those who knew Naruto well enough would be so lenient to such behavior from him.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean…?” Naruto gave them a look, but received no answer except a smirk from Tsunade in response.

“Um, H…Hokage-sama…?” Sakura started with uncertainty, her eyes wandering off a bit. “Not to rush or anything, but if you don’t mind me asking, what is this mission we’re supposed to be going on…?”

“Ah, I’m glad you asked…” Tsunade replied. “I was just about to get to that.”

…

A/N: I hope this was decent and seemed in character enough. I hope I’m not trying to focus on too many things at once or something… I especially hope this doesn’t seem rushed. Personally, I’m a little surprised that there wasn’t a lot of focus on Sasuke’s and especially Sakura’s thoughts about Naruto’s mysterious power, and while I haven’t brought it up yet in this story, I can’t help but think about how Orochimaru went off about Naruto being the nine tails right in front of Sasuke and Sakura yet it never gets brought up again and they don’t even think back to his words. They were in kind of a panic so I suppose it makes sense, but I’m wanting to tackle stuff and concepts that I would have liked the manga and the anime to go into more.

Also, although I’m still not certain what I’m going to do with Itachi or if I’ll even go into that, I’m still going to consider his past canon, as implied by this chapter, thinking about the tension between the village and the Uchiha clan that was brought up. However, at this point in the series, Sasuke still hated Itachi either way, so currently it’s irrelevant for now, I suppose. This is more focused on mental health issues and bad coping mechanisms, PTSD, emotional abuse and trauma, that sort of thing. Although, seeing as this does diverge from the canon drastically, some events will probably still end up being similar, but… have a much better turn out, because I’m a genuine sucker for angst with happy endings or at least bittersweet endings.

Chapter 4

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 4
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

Really concerned about Tsunade here… I've hardly ever wrote for her, so this is probably HORRIBLY written and out of character oof…

But this is what I felt best, and there are reasons I had it though, that will play into later relatively important concepts in the story.

If she's been around them a little bit up to this point, met them a few times, could see herself in Sakura, heard Jiraiya and Kakashi's words on the matter, and also knew of Sasuke's and Naruto's rivalry, considering Team Hiruzen and Team Minato are kind of a parallel to team 7… I only felt she wouldn't be beyond offering them advice. I hope this didn't seem like rushing the gun at all ughhhh. A huge part of me wanted to leave out the pep talk because it kind of felt odd, but the other part of me wanted to keep it because I'm a sucker for motherly/big sisterly Tsunade kill me. (I'm for removing it if people don't like it…) Natually, I had Sasuke challenge it in the scene to add more of a sense of realism (considering their characters) and set the mood for future development.

Replies to Reviews:

WheelOfDawn on Chapter 3:

"Finally they start noticing the shit Naruto has to put up with. I'm a sucker for depressing stories that deal with hard issues. Looking forward to more."

- Somebody had to, and I love depressing stories as well, so I'm having a lot of fun writing this!

…

"Alright, listen up, you three."

Sasuke, Sakura and Naruto looked up at Tsunade, awaiting the details of their mission.

"For this mission, you're going to be escorting two young men to a port town called Shinzuku. Your destination is located approximately 350 kilometers South West of Tanzaku Town, so it could take you up to a few days to get there. Make sure you're fully prepared before you leave. I-"

A sudden knock on the door, cut her off.

"Come in."

It only took a second before the door was opened. In stepped two slim, slightly tanned males, one had medium length stark white hair pulled into a loose braid and was probably barely older than Naruto, while the other had short black hair and appeared to a bit younger than Kakashi.

“Ah, you’re back.” Tsunade smiled. “These are the people that are going to be the ones protecting you on your journey back home.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I’m Izumi and this is my Older Brother, Saburo.” The while haired boy said casually, pointing at the young man behind him, who bowed a bit in acknowledgement.

“I’m Hatake Kakashi, I’m the Jounin in charge of them. Now, why don’t you three all introduce yourselves to our clients?” Kakashi encouraged his students.

“Oh, right. Hi.” Sakura smiled a bit sheepishly. “I’m Haruno Sakura. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Uchiha Sasuke…” Sasuke muttered.

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto and I’m gonna become the Hokage, ya know!” Naruto said with a cocky grin.

Of course, Sakura and basically everybody else thought exasperated (but kind of amused at the same time), *leave it up to* Naruto *to give more than just a simple name introduction…*

Izumi seemed dumbfounded for a moment, but momentarily smirked, almost seeming to find the blonde’s enthusiasm rather charming. He then turned back to glance at Tsunade, putting his hands into the pockets of his black sweatpants. “Well, since that’s out of the way, when can we expect to leave, Hokage-sama?”

Sakura briefly wondered if there was a reason Saburo hadn’t said anything, and why Izumi had been the only one doing the talking. Maybe he was just shy, she thought dismissively, pushing the question to the side for the time being.

“Right… I want you all to be at the Main Gate within the next two hours.” Tsunade instructed. “Pack your bags and take care of whatever you have to in the meantime, because once you leave, you’ll be on the road for at least a few hours before you reach the next town over. As for you two, you can wait at the entrance if you want. Other than that, you’re dismissed.”

After a moment, everybody bowed and began to leave the room, Naruto being the first to run out, going on a tangent about being hungry for Ichiraku Ramen. However, before they could make it to the door, Sasuke and Sakura were surprised when Tsunade called out their names:

“Actually, hold on. Sasuke, Sakura, I’d like to have a word with you two about something…”

“Huh? Who? Us?” Sakura jumped a bit, looking back at her nervously. “We’re not in trouble or anything, are we?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. This won’t even take five minutes.” Tsunade assured, getting up.

“Just listen to what she has to say, Sakura. You’ll be fine, I promise.” Kakashi reassured her, easing her discomfort by a ton. “You too, Sasuke.”

As he said that, he gave both of them a light pat on the head before leaving the room.

“Um, W…What did you need to see us about, Hokage-sam-?” Sakura started to ask, but cut herself off, when she felt a gentle hand on her cheek. A green glow of chakra illuminated the injury and it didn’t take long before the bruise on her face was gone.

“What kind of Hokage of would I be if I let you run off with injuries that I could just as easily fix?” Tsunade smirked. One month ago, she would have never got involved with the matter, and probably wouldn’t have cared, but after meeting Naruto, his words and will to not give up… It had really struck a cord within her and reminded of her goals; of her desire to protect her home village and the people in it.

Even if she didn’t know these two all that well, they were Naruto’s dear friends, and also a part of Konoha. Also, while she couldn’t quite place her finger on it, there was something she really liked about the girl already, despite having only been around her a few times…

Sakura didn’t know what to think or say at first. The act of kindness filled her with a sense of warmth that she’d rarely ever received from her own mother before, and she hated to admit it, but it… actually made her really happy.

“Alright, now for you. Show me your fist.” Tsunade said, looking toward Sasuke.

“H-hey…!” Sasuke blushed a bit defensively when she reached for his hand. Surprisingly, however he didn’t put up much of a fight, and let her do what she wanted.

Whatever the cause was, it was a blunt blow to his his knuckles, and considering the scratches…

“Let me guess. I’ll bet it was a mirror you hit, am I right?” She guessed, causing Sasuke to tense. Sakura gave him a sudden look of worry at the realization.

His silence gave her all the confirmation she needed, so she decided not to press the matter.

Sasuke said nothing after that, focusing on the warmth of her hand, something welling up inside of him.

“You know… I’ve heard quite a bit about you two from Kakashi. And from what I’ve gathered, it seems you’re both quite the character.” Tsunade said, catching their attention.

“Oh, no, I’m really not that great at all, Hokage-sama…! Ha-ha-ha…” Sakura denied it with an awkward laugh. She would always act confident around her rival Ino and used to around Sasuke and Naruto all the time, but the truth was, her self-doubt and low self-esteem were almost unbearable sometimes, her mother’s words to her and the effects of bullying from the past only making it worse. It was Ino who’d inspired so much confidence in her and had made her want to become stronger, to not continue living in her shadow and as she had

watched Naruto and Sasuke progress so many times right in front of her, those doubts had only resurfaced worse than ever as of late.

They always seemed to be getting stronger, honing new jutsu, where as she herself... was always behind thems… It was just becoming a repeat of Ino again.

“Don’t be so modest, Sakura!” Tsunade snapped her out of her thoughts. “I may not know you all that well myself, but from what I’ve heard from Kakashi, even a fool could tell that you’ve always had a unique affinity for Chakra control, even in the beginning of your journey. You’ve fought tooth and nail just to keep up with those around you, with only your persistence and encouragement from your friends pushing you forward. You’ve shown how amazing shinobi can be, even *without* some famous bloodline. You have an astounding inner passion that will always keep you pressing forward, so don’t you dare cut yourself short, girl.”

Sakura’s eyes widened a bit. Not only Kakashi, but the Hokage too had praised her? For some reason, she felt a boost of confidence at that thought. She almost felt like she could tackle the world. Almost.

“And as for *you*,” Tsunade turned to Sasuke, almost sounding like a mom or something. “Rivalry is one thing, but you can’t live your whole life comparing yourself and holding yourself to the standards of others. I don’t give a damn what anybody may have said in the past, be it *Uchiha Itachi himself*, but you are *not* weak. You just need to accept that already.”

A huge part of Tsunade honestly didn’t know where the words in her mouth were coming from, but considering everything Jiraiya and Kakashi had told her about both of the young ninja in front of her, of their accomplishments and much more, something like a familial instinct got the better of her(she did once have a little brother, after all.).

For some reason, Sasuke was suddenly reminded of Mikoto. When it came down to it, she wasn’t afraid to occasionally scold him for things, but she also had an inner warmth and passion about her that she always showed when she had to. Yes, this woman wasn’t exactly like Mikoto, but the feelings she invoked were so similar it threatened to suffocate him, the memories it caused, just a little act of kindness, just a few encouraging words, reminded him of his haunting vulnerability, of all the things he’d lost. He wanted to scream.

“You still don’t have enough hatred…”

“Accept it…?” He glared at the ground, unable to look her in the eye. “What the hell would you understand about *anything* I’ve been going through?!”

She barely knew him, what right did she have to go talk about things she knew *nothing about*?!

“Sasuke-kun, what’s-“ Sakura reached out to touch his shoulder, shocked by his spiteful outburst. He slapped her hand away.

“*Don’t touch me*. I’m going to pack my things…“ He muttered aggressively, his tone cold and harsh, his bangs shadowing his eyes, as he walked off and left the room.

“I’m so sorry, Hokage-sama.” Sakura immediately after bowed apologetically. “I promise he didn’t mean that… He’s just been really confused lately and I-”

“It’s alright, Sakura.” Tsunade placed a hand on her head to offer some reassurance. Perhaps she had over stepped her bounds.

Hokage-sama is so nice…, Sakura thought yet again, barely managing to restrain herself from caving into the soft touch of the woman.

“I may *look* young, but I do know a thing or two about what you’re going through right now.” Tsunade smiled a bit, thinking back to how her own team had fallen apart over the years(Perhaps that was why she had felt the need to say something).

Jiraiya had mentioned that Sasuke reminded him a bit of Orochimaru and Tsunade could see why. But Sasuke was different. There was still hope for him. Cutting him short and just giving up on him because he was an Uchiha… It would go against her pride as a Senju. He grandfather would *never* agree with such logic.

“…I just want to help him… But he’s always pushing me away… Just like Naruto and Lee… Why are boys like that…? Why do they always have to act so strong…?”

"Don't you tell a man to run!"

Tsunade gave a side glance as she thought back to Nawaki, and then Naruto’s and Jiraiya’s words.

"...Heh... It's okay... Until I become Hokage... No way... There's no way I'm gonna die!"

“A shinobi is one who endures.”

A small pained smile played at the corner of her lips, understanding some of what the girl felt.

“You got that right. Guys like *that* are stubborn as hell and they never know when to give up.” Tsunade said, smirking. “But you know what?”

“What is it?” Sakura inquired, looking up at her.

“Neither do *we*. We’re *all* fighters, Sakura. We have to keep both them *and* ourselves in check. Hell, Naruto’s so reckless he’d probably jump into a volcano if it meant standing true to his nindo. So keep an eye on him, and don’t you dare give up on either of your teammates, okay?” Tsunade said.

“Right…! Thank you so much, Hokage-sama… I guess I should probably be going now. If you’ll excuse me, I-” Sakura started to say.

“Hold it.” Tsunade said, a little harsher than intended, startling Sakura.

“Hm?” Sakura inquired, barely above a grunt.

"…If you don't mind me asking… Who was it that hit you?" Tsunade wanted to know.

"I… It was just an accident, although you wouldn't have known since I only told Naruto and Sasuke-kun about it." Sakura forced a smile, dismissively. Mentioning her mother or getting her parents involved would only cause trouble for all parties involved. Besides… It was only one time, it wasn't like it happened every day or anything. Well, the physical aggression anyway.

However, Tsunade was not an idiot. She could tell that Sakura was lying or at least hiding something, and Sakura's fake smile only added to that.

"I see…" Tsunade thought out loud, deciding not to press the matter. "Well, you wouldn't want to be late."

"Right." Sakura bowed before exiting.

Some of her words had seemed to get through to Sakura, but Sasuke, as she'd feared(based on her own past experiences), was a completely different matter. He definitely needed as much support as he could get right now – heavens knew he needed it, but only somebody who could relate on more of a personal level to him, could ever truly hope to be there for the boy.

"Kakashi… I leave the rest up to you… I'm sure you'll figure something out…"

…

A/N: I hope you all like it... This took me a while to consider my wording and everything...

Chapter 5

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 5.
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

(In this chapter, when I mention Sakura having motherly characteristics, I tried to foreshadow Sakura-Kushina parallels without making it weird. So forgive me. In canon, Sakura acts like both a big sister and mom at points, but I wanna write this in a romantic aspect so I wanna avoid focusing too much on that. I had Naruto acknowledge that Sakura is mom-type but that to him there's a lot more to it than that. If that makes any sense. The Kushina parallels will get brought up later probably by Kakashi, Jiraiya and Tsunade.)

Replies to Reviews:

WheelOfDawn on Chapter 4:

I like Tsunade in this acting all motherly! I think it is acceptable in her character to be a bit kinder, especially to those she thinks of as kids like Naruto. Looking forward to the next!

I'm glad you like it! And that was the purpose. For this story, it's almost necessary, since one of the main themes in this story is gonna be family.

...

Naruto walked through Konoha, once again trying his best to ignore the glares of villagers as he headed to the Ichiraku Ramen stand. Along the way, he was brought to a halt by a sudden cry.

"Uwaa…!"

Looking over he saw a young boy who'd fallen and skinned his knee. He was crying. He was prepared to run over and help, but before he could act, a young woman immediately rushed over to the side of the injured boy."

"Koichi…! Are you okay?" she asked, worriedly, as she examined the wound on his knee. Even though it was skinned a little, it wasn't that bad over all.

"It really hurts, mom…" The boy whimpered, tears in his eyes.

"I bet it *does*. I did *tell* you stop running… But you never *listen* to me…" The mother scolded her son. However, after a moment of looking at Koichi's saddened eyes, her expression softened, she made it clear she knew she couldn't stay upset at him. "Good grief, let me get a bandage…" The mother reached into her purse, pulled out a bandage before lightly brushing off the sand around the injury. She then opened the bandage and covered the wound.

"There. All better." She said softly.

"But it still hurts, though…" Koichi muttered, pouting.

"Tell you what." The mother smiled after a moment. "Why don't we go and get some ice cream on the way home? Will that help you feel any better?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah! I want some mint chocolate chip ice cream with extra sprinkles! Let's go now!" Koichi perked up almost immediately after, a bright smile plastered on his face.

Naruto gave a pain-filled smile himself as he watched the young boy grab the mother's hand and pull her off. It was moments like this that Naruto couldn't help but be reminded of his loneliness.

"I wonder… if my mom and dad were anything like that..." He mused, as he headed on towards his destination.

The Third Hokage had never given him a clear explanation of what happened to his parents, who they were or even what they were like, so he couldn't help but ponder it.

"Hey, Naruto, it's been a while! How's it going?" a familiar voice snapped him out of his thoughts. He looked up to see his old teacher standing there with a smile. Immediately, he wiped the dismayed expression off his face, not wanting to cause any worry.

"Iruka-sensei! Hehe, I was just about to get some ramen, since I'm about to go off on another mission and all." Naruto scratched his cheek sheepishly.

"I see. Well, do you mind if I join you? I was just heading there myself actually. I figure it'd be a great opportunity to catch up, and I'd really like to hear what you've been up to over these past few weeks." Iruka smiled.

A sudden warmth filled Naruto's chest after a moment(the same warmth that he always felt being around Iruka), and without thinking about it, he suddenly found himself returning the gesture, taking him up on the offer.

…

"*You and I both have found precious friends, haven't we?"*

"Is there… something bothering you…? If there is, you know you can talk to me, right?"

"Stop arguing already! We're supposed to be a team, aren't we?! We're friends…! What good has fighting each other ever done for us?!"

"…Yeah! You're right, Sakura-chan…! We have to stick together no matter what!"

"Rivalry is one thing, but you can't live your whole life comparing yourself and holding yourself to the standards of others. I don't give a damn what anybody may have said in the past, be it Itachi Uchiha himself, but you are ***not*** *weak. You just need to* accept *that already."*

Sasuke stood in his house, looking down at the portrait of Team 7. He had already finished packing - it wasn't like he'd ever been one to bring much with him on trips in the first place, so it hadn't taken him long.

The recent words of his teammates and sensei echoed in his head, before he recalled Tsunade's words, her gentle touch as she had healed him fresh in his mind.

She had reminded him so much of his mother… of how she used to bandage his injuries when he got hurt during his shuriken training.

He hated it.

He hated how the woman had acted like she knew everything about him despite having rarely ever spoken with him, and, above all else, he hated feeling *so damn vulnerable*.

Yet, down deep, there was a voice telling him that all of them were right. Should he… accept it…?

"You don't have enough hatred."

No.

He was an *avenger*.

That's what he'd lived his entire life for up to now. It was the only purpose he had left. He had to focus on getting stronger, to defeat Itachi. He had to keep his sight on that goal alone. He had to catch up with Naruto or he would never be powerful enough to defeat that man. Whether or not they were friends were irrelevant in that aspect.

…

"Hey, Ochan, can I get one Spicy Pork Miso?" Naruto grinned, coming into the noodle shop, followed by Iruka.

"I'll just have the same thing he's getting." Iruka added.

"Oh, it's you two! It's good to see you!" Teuchi looked up happily. "How's your training been going, Naruto?"

"It's going great, I'm a *ton* stronger than I used to be, ya know! I'm actually about to go off on a mission, so I figured I'd come by to say hello."

"I see! Well, take a seat and I'll have your ramen made in no time!" Teuchi said. "I'll throw in an extra bowl just for you!"

"Alright! That's what I'm talking about! Thanks, Ochan!" Naruto said, sitting at the table next to where Iruka had sat down at.

"Hey, Naruto, I wanted to ask you something. How have things… between you and Sasuke been going? I heard from Kakashi that you two have been having some problems lately." Iruka broached the subject.

"Well, it's kind of complicated right now… Sasuke's been really mad about something for quite a while, and a couple weeks ago, we got into a huge fight..." Naruto gave a down cast look as he thought about it. He knew some of the reasons Sasuke was upset, as Sakura had explained to him quite well the stuff he didn't know about it - the cursemark, Orochimaru, his family... but bringing that up to Iruka would only end up causing him more worry, so he chose to not mention it. "Sakura-chan has also been kind of depressed over it as well… I can't stand seeing her feel that way..."

"Stop arguing already! We're supposed to be a team, aren't we?! We're friends…! What good has fighting each other ever done for us?!"

Her words echoed in his head, as he rubbed at his arm a bit, barely suppressing the urge to scratch his wounds.

"Iruka-sensei…?" He glanced off to the side. His voice was barely above a whisper. He suddenly thought back to the mother he'd seen a short while ago, the feeling he felt when he saw Iruka, when he was around Sasuke and Sakura.

"What is it, Naruto?" Iruka inquired, a bit taken aback by the sudden change in mood. Naruto always remained positive. The ordeal with his teammates must be really bothering him. Not that he could particularly blame him.

"What's it like… to have a family…? You had one, right…? I mean… I've never had one before, so sometimes I can't help but wonder about it." Naruto murmured, deep in thought.

Where had that even come from? Something was definitely off, Iruka realized, but none the less, he obliged.

"Well, I guess it depends on how you're looking at it. Families can be a tricky thing, after all…" Iruka said.

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"How to put it…? On one hand, it can the warmest experience you could possibly imagine..." Iruka thought back to his parents and how much he *still* missed them, even to this day. "But on the other, families do fight sometimes… It doesn't always go as smoothly as one would like to think. Although I suppose it could also depend on the individual… But, Naruto…"

"Huh?" Naruto looked up at him.

"… Family isn't always by blood," Iruka pointed out. "and I think you understand that better than anybody, don't you?"

Sasuke, Sakura and Kakashi flashed in his head. To be honest, he'd always kind of thought of Sasuke as like a brother, or at least wondered if that was what it was *like* to have a brother. Kakashi was kind of like the laid back dad he'd seen in manga. Sakura... she had some... motherly characteristics, but... there was something special, she was strong and cute and had a uniqueness about her that really drew him to her. It wasn't just about her acting kind of like a mom sometimes.

Briefly, he even thought Iruka was almost like dad too, just a different type, strict and kind of nag, but also caring when it counts. Another trope he'd seen in manga before, and even in other kids' dads before. He knew he shouldn't be basing his feelings off of such things but it was hard not to, and surely the writers had family to base the characters off of, right? However, he didn't voice this thought, not wanting to make it awkward. Besides, he didn't know what to think of saying he had more than one guy he saw as a father figure. And then there was the pervert sage...

"…Mn… Thanks, Iruka-sensei." a part of Naruto wanted to continue the subject, but decided against it, replacing the doubtful look on his face with a smile once again, as Teuchi had come back over with their ramen.

"Here you are! Three hot bowls of spicy pork miso!" Teuchi announced, placing the food in front of them.

"Alright! I'm starved!" Naruto picked up his chopsticks excitedly, pushing back his insecurities to avoid worrying Iruka any further.

"Itadakimasu!" He said, before breaking the chopsticks apart and began eating.

A part of Iruka was still worried, but he decided against pushing it any further. After all, Naruto never stayed depressed for long. He would surely be fine.

With that reassuring thought in mind, he began to eat as well.

…

"I'm not very happy *at all* with the way you acted earlier, Sakura."

Sakura knew that another nagging would be coming as soon as she entered the door to her house, but unfortunately, she had had no choice if she wanted to pick up her stuff.

"Hmph. I don't think I ever said I *needed* you to be." Sakura glared at her mother, walking right past her.

"Hold it, you're not going anywhere." Mebuki grabbed her harshly by her arm.

"You know… you should try to listen to your mother more, Sakura." Her father chimed in, offering no more help than he ever did.

"Why should I? All you two ever do is tell me what I can and can't do with my life! What I am and aren't capable of! Why should I listen to somebody who's always basically telling me I'm worthless no matter what accomplishments I make?! Let go of me!" Sakura somehow managed to break out of her strong grip, and ran to her room.

"Don't you dare put words into my mouth! I'm the one that helped you get to where you are, so you need to start showing me a little more appreciation!"

"Appreciation for *what*?" Sakura spat, without thinking twice. "Ino and Team 7 are the ones who have supported me all this time, not you. Just like I when I was being bullied at the academy and even now when I'm already dealing with enough problems! You didn't care at all! You *never* have!"

She knew she was perhaps stretching it. There had been times Mebuki had been there for her in some ways, after all, but it wasn't in the way she had *needed* her to be. She was always lecturing her, but she never tried to truly understand her for who *she* was as a person. That was why they never got along.

She wanted to say more, but chose against it, knowing speaking up would only lead to more arguments. Instead, she snatched her arm away from her mother, despite the woman's angry protests, and rushed to her room. She picked up a change of clothes she could sleep in and packed it into a bag, alongside a few other materials she would need, before writing a note, in case her mother went looking for her. She then made her exit through her window, not wanting to see her Mebuki's or Kizashi's faces for a long time. Sometimes, they were more on neutral grounds and could tolerate each other's presences. Other days, like today, it was just not the case at all. Her mother had just *wanted* to pick a fight today.

Honestly… Why can't she be more understanding sometimes…? Something like… Hokage-sama is…

Tsunade may have been strict and rough edged, but she still had a genuine kindness about her and apparently knew how to lighten up, unlike a *certain* someone.

With the image of Mebuki fussing at her burned into her memory, she walked off towards the gate in a huff.

…

"Oh boy, I'm stuffed! I couldn't eat another bite. Your ramen is unbeatable, Ochan!" Naruto grinned, rubbing his stomach, receiving a smirk from Iruka, who'd stopped himself at one bowl.

"Is that so? Well, I'm glad you think so. Me and my daughter do our best to please our customers." Teuchi smiled himself.

"Oh, hey, that reminds me. Where's Ayame? I noticed she's not here today." Naruto inquired.

"She unfortunately has a bit of a cold right now, so I told her she should wait it out." Teuchi explained.

"Oh, I see…" Naruto thought about it for a moment. "Well, I hope she feels better soon. It's not as fun around here with her gone?"

"I'll be sure to let her know you said that! But it is my daughter, so I'm sure she'll be better in no time."

"That's true…" Naruto murmured. Ayame had always been a lively and confident girl. Even back in the academy days, although it was more in a passive way, there had been an occasional time or two when the young lady had rooted for him to do his best. They may have not been *that* close or anything, but he still kind of liked being around her. "Well, I should probably pay for my bill."

"Hold on, don't worry about paying. I'll cover your bill, Naruto." Iruka offered as Naruto had started to reach into his pocket to pull out his frog coin purse.

"Really?! You're the best, Iruka-sensei!" Naruto smiled, hugging him without thinking, feeling a little too warm inside for comfort, remembering the mother and her child, as they had went off to get ice cream.

"Hey, no need to get so emotional, it's just a few bowls of Ramen." Iruka laughed, but returned the embrace anyway. Naruto was always like this, he supposed, getting excited over the smallest acts of kindness. He rubbed Naruto's head, before smiling. "Now, you better go on, you wouldn't want to be late for your mission."

"Right!" Naruto said, before running of taking his leave. "See you later, Iruka-sensei!"

"He sure is a hyper one, that kid." Teuchi noted aloud.

"Yeah…" Iruka said, fondly. "But that *is* what makes him Naruto."

Teuchi thought back to the day Naruto had first walked by his store, attracted by the delectable odor. He could remember it as if it were just yesterday. The boy had looked so hesitant, like he had obviously expected to be shooed away, just as many other shop owners had, no doubt, done to him up until then. The look on the boy's

face when he was invited in and first tried the ramen was almost heartbreaking to watch. It had been clear that very few people in the entire village had probably treated him with enough common decency up to then to even let him shop at their stores. And since then, Naruto had come back over and over again, and had even become one of his favorite customers.

Teuchi smirked a bit.

That kid… He sure has come a long way since then.

…

For once, Naruto actually found himself completely unphased by the villager's harsh glares as he walked to his house, and for a little while, he actually felt like he was on cloud nine. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before the words of those around him got to him again, as they always did.

It wasn't until the word "*kitsune*" got uttered, however, that he lost all of his former confidence.

"Once a demon, always a demon."

He immediately fastened his pace, and hurried back to his apartment, failing miserably at not acknowledging the words of those around him after that.

As always, his "home" was empty, and lonely. He pushed back his urge to let his emotions show, and forced himself to focus on his priorities. "Alright, I better get to packing! I wouldn't want to be the last one there!"

As he was stuffing his bag with various items including instant ramen(just in case), he unknowingly dropped one of his Kunai onto the floor, the loud sound of metal clinking against its hard surface startling him. He looked down to see the blade glistening in the light.

His eyes suddenly fixated on its edges, the wounds on his arm itching beneath his sleeve. Suddenly, he felt an unbearable urge to tear his skin to pieces yet again, just as he had done so the night before.

Just a few cuts couldn't hurt, right? He still had a little bit of time, and he really *needed* it right now. The pain would serve as distraction… And the blood would offer him some temporary relief from the heavy emotions he was feeling at the moment.

It was better that than have some kind of break down for Sasuke to use as leverage against him later, or to unnecessarily worry the others, he rationalized, so, without thinking, he picked up the weapon and headed to the bathroom. Rolling up his sleeve, he then took off the old bandages and threw them away.

The kunai now firm in his hand, he quickly made a slash on his forearm and allowed himself to become entranced by the blood flow, his nerves, at long last, relaxing once again.

…

Sakura was the first one to reach the village gates(no surprise there, considering she hadn't made any effort to stick around at home.) She felt exhausted after having yet another argument with her mother. She hardly noticed when Sasuke arrived.

"Naruto's still not here yet, huh?" he duly noted, catching her attention.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, but I'm sure he'll probably be here shortly, though. You know him, always unpredictable." Sakura said, trying her best to regain her composure, even though her heart honestly wasn't in it at all.

"Hmph, that's true..." Sasuke smirked a bit. However, could tell that she was forcing herself, and that she clearly wasn't feeling that well, but decided to give her space and not broach the matter. She obviously wasn't in a mood to talk, and it's not like it was any of his business anyway. Although, he still couldn't help but wonder what it was that had upset her. Sakura rarely ever looked that genuinely depressed.

…

Contrary to expectation, Kakashi was the next one to arrive, followed by Izumi and Saburo.

"Where's the hyper one?" Izumi asked, raising an eyebrow.

Kakashi mused. "That's odd. Usually, Naruto's already with you two, when I arrive. I wonder where he is."

"How should I know? 'Che, that loser probably got in a fight or something." Sasuke muttered with a smirk, imaging it.

"Kakashi-sensei, what should we do?" Sakura asked after a moment. "Should we go and look for him?"

"That won't be necessary, at least not yet." Kakashi reassured, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure Naruto's fine. Knowing him, he'll probably be here any minute now."

After all, even Naruto had never had been anything like *Obito* in *tardiness*. Kakashi *himself* had been following more in Obito's footsteps on *that* matter(although he was still late, everybody except Sasuke and Sakura.).

Sure enough, as if on cue, Naruto arrived moments later, panting for breath, indicative that he'd headed there in a last minute rush. "Sorry I'm late, guys…! I kinda got held up by something, but I'm ready to go now!"

"Good, we're all here. See? No reason to worry, Sakura." Kakashi gently placed a hand on her head.

Sakura blushed a bit, before opting to scold Naruto. "Honestly, I should be mad, but it's not like Kakashi-sensei doesn't do this to us all the time, so just be on time next time, Naruto...!"

"Y-you got it, Sakura-chan." Naruto smiled nervously.

"That goes for you too, sensei! You're setting a bad example for both Naruto and our clients!" Sakura added accusingly.

"Right..." Kakashi sweat-dropped. He really *had* built a rep if his students were bringing it up in such a manner to use as a standard for how one *shouldn't* be…

Kakashi pushed the thought aside and grew serious. "Anyway, it's time to go."

…

A/N: I hope this turned out well. I should probably make it clear that I myself have a lot of attachment issues, so a LOT of this being written in such ways is full on projection, you'll have to forgive me…

Terms:

Kitsune: Fox

Itadakimasu: Basically a phrase to show gratitude for food.

Ochan: This is what Naruto calls Teuchi. This means "pops" and is a shortened form of Ojichan. But I'm not sure if I spelled it right, so you'll have to forgive me.

Chapter 6

Story: Melancholy, Chapter 6

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

Note: This chapter is based heavily off of one of my own experiences, so I tried to think realistically about the physical effects of excessive cutting and self-harm.

As a side note, I should probably mention that I have a very hard time focusing on more than one character at a time, so I've been having a very hard time balancing them out as much as I have. It's taken a lot of patience I hope you all understand... Also, from a narrative standpoint, I think I'm going to have some of Kakashi's own troubles resurface and be tackled over the course of this fanfiction. As in the problems of his own past reflecting on the struggles of his students when the issues arise… (It'll make more sense when I get there.)

Replies to Reviews:

WheelOfDawn on Chapter 5:

> ***Oh these poor children, they all need love! Thanks for the chapter and for always answering my reviews! I'm sure the blood loss with start to affect mission performance, or stamina...It also has a way to distract you hours or days afterwards, not something that will be good for Naruto in a possibly life or death situation.***
>
> All of them will be getting the help they need slowly. And blood loss really does. I know from past experiences, so I actually will be sort of tackling that this chapter and even more so later I think.

...

Naruto was quickly starting to have regrets. *Major regrets.*

The words "dizzy" and "nauseated" barely scratched the surface of how he felt right now. He'd told himself "just a few cuts", but, of course, it *never* went that way and now he was

paying the price.

He knew he needed to rest a bit or something before he passed out, but he didn't want to cause any unnecessary worry for the others. Unfortunately, it was pretty obvious to those around him that something was off, that he was starting to struggle to even walk straight.

"Naruto, what's wrong?" Sakura asked in concern, without restraint, noticing how pale he looked.

"It's… It's nothing to worry about, Sakura-chan…" Naruto said with a weak smile. "I'm totally… fine…"

"Hn… You'd think he was dying or something." Sasuke muttered with a smirk, hiding the fact that he actually did wonder what was happening to Naruto.

"What was that-" Naruto started to glare at him.

"That's enough, you two." Kakashi said, silencing both of them, before glancing back at Naruto. "Naruto, why don't you sit down and take a moment to rest before you pass out?"

"Yeah, do what you gotta do. It's not like we're in any rush or anything. Besides, we've been walking for a couple hours now. We could use a break." Izumi said casually. Saburo remained silent but nodded in agreement.

"I told you I'm fine…! I don't need to-" Naruto started to argue.

" *Now* , Naruto." Kakashi emphasized the "now" part. The last thing he needed was a student fainting on him.

"But I-" Naruto once again tried to protest.

"Just do what he said already, Naruto!" Sakura snapped, interrupting him as she accusingly pointed a finger at him. Naruto was always pushing himself to the limit, forcing himself to press forward when he clearly wasn't able to handle it. "And no 'buts'! You need to think about yourself for once!"

Naruto opened his mouth to protest, but caved in at the realization that Sakura was worried for him. "Fine…"

"Now, come on. Sit down." Sakura said.

As he watched Sakura pulling Naruto over to sit against a nearby tree stump and hearing Naruto grumbling in response, Kakashi couldn't help but briefly be reminded of how Rin used to take his and Obito's wellbeing more serious than either of them themselves did. Although Sakura had a fearsome personality, she still had a deep underlying concern and compassion that had developed for both of her teammates, just like Rin had.

Assuming that Naruto was probably dehydrated or something, Sakura pulled out an unopened water bottle from her bag. She uncapped it and without a second thought, she held it up to his mouth. "Here, drink this. It might help a bit."

In all the time she'd known him, he'd rarely ever looked this bad off. Something was obviously wrong.

Albeit reluctant at first, Naruto graciously took a few sips of the liquid and swallowed. He must have lost way too much blood. They'd been on the road for at least a couple hours now, and the heat was *unbearable* at the moment, so that didn't help anything at all. He wasn't particularly feeling that great when he left, but it was a hundred times worse now.

"I wonder if Hokage-sama would be interested in taking Sakura on as an apprentice... She has better chakra control than either of her teammates and she has the skills required to effectively care for patients…" Kakashi mused, observing the two. Maybe he would discuss that later with her. He himself wasn't qualified to teach one on such complex procedures, but a huge part of him believed that Sakura truly had what it took to become a medical ninja.

"Thanks..., Sakura-chan…" Naruto said after a bit, once the light headed spell was finally over.

"Don't mention it." Sakura said softly. "So how are you feeling...?"

"A lot better now, thanks to you." Naruto grinned, a small blush heating his cheeks. "I guess the heat was just kind of getting to me, ya know? But now I'm back to normal and ready to go."

"That's good. I'm glad." Sakura sighed in relief, an unidentifiable feeling welling up in her chest.

"And here I was almost worried we were gonna have to carry Naruto back to the village." Kakashi said jokingly.

Naruto smirked after a moment. "Hey, don't count me off that quickly, Kakashi-sensei. It takes a lot more than just a little bit of nausea and dizziness to bring *me* down."

"I suppose that *is* true." Kakashi agreed, before placing a gentle hand on Naruto's shoulder and kneeling beside him. "All jokes aside, though, try to go easy this time, okay? It wouldn't do any good for any of us if you went and fainted on us, now would it?"

"Right… Sorry about that, guys..." Naruto sheepishly scratched the back of his head.

Sasuke scoffed. "Hmph. Just don't hold us back anymore, *usuratonkachi* ."

"Hah, we'll *see* who's holding who back, just you wait, *teme* !" Naruto glared at Sasuke, jumping up. "Kakashi-sensei, you said Tanzaku town was our first stop, right?"

"Well, that *is* what I said, but-" Kakashi started to say, but was cut off by Naruto before he could finish.

"Great! That works out perfectly! Me and Ero-sennin went there to retrieve Tsunade-obaachan. I know exactly how to get there from here! I'll race you!"

"Hold on, Naruto-" Kakashi started to say, but was abruptly cut off by Sasuke, who was smirking himself.

"Tch, fine by me." Sasuke said, fully in on the idea.

"Sasuke-kun-" Sakura tried to speak, but was cut off by Naruto.

"I'm ready when *you* are." He challenged.

"Naruto, you're in no condition to-!" Sakura reached out to stop Naruto. Unfortunately, neither one of them were paying attention to anybody else.

"Then let's go, *dobe* !" Sasuke said, before jumping into a nearby tree and making his way towards the direction of their closest destination.

"Just give me three seconds and I'll make you eat my dust!" Naruto immediately took off after him, leaving Kakashi and Sakura sighing.

"Don't those two ever listen…?" Kakashi groaned.

"So much for taking it easy. That idiot couldn't stand still for ten minutes if his life depended on it!" Sakura held up a fist, before slumping. "And Sasuke-kun just went along with it…"

"Well, that's true… But, you know... This could be a good thing, Sakura." Kakashi mused aloud.

It didn't take but a moment to realize what he was referring to. Sasuke and Naruto had been at such odds lately and so focused on their rivalry that they(especially Sasuke) had almost lost sight of the fact that beneath all that, they were still friends. It was nice to see them acting like this again, even if it was at a time like this.

"It *has* been a while…" Sakura gave a small smile, thinking about it. She couldn't help but hope, more than anything that it could stay like this. That Sasuke and Naruto would start getting along again, like *proper* rivals and everything could go back to normal.

"So is this how things normally are between you guys…?" Izumi asked, casually.

"Sorry, you'll have to forgive them again." Kakashi held up his hand apologetically. "Those two *can* be a bit of a handful sometimes."

"On the contrary, it's totally fine." Izumi smiled a bit light heartedly. "Uzumaki-san just seems really… overzealous is all. From where we originally came from, we never really saw people like him."

Izumi gave a glance to the side, as if remembering something painful.

"Naruto *is* an odd one…" Kakashi agreed. "But perhaps… that's what draws so many people to him."

"That's right." Sakura gave a small smile, looking off in the direction her teammates had ran off into. "He can be a total pain sometimes… But when it comes down to it, there's something about him that really inspires people…"

"Come on, Sakura-chan! You've come so far...! If you let yourself lose now to that crazy Sasuke-chaser, you'll be a disgrace to all women!"

Naruto's words to her from back in the Chunin Exam prelims echoed in her head. If it hadn't been for him, she would have lost to Ino. But he had encouraged her to keep going, and it was because of him that she was able to break the mind transfer and fight as a true equal against her life-long rival.

"He not only refuses to give up on himself, but he won't let others give up on themselves either. Honestly… Naruto's as ambitious as they come… He puts everything he has into everything he does, even when the odds are stacked against him…"

No matter the situation, Naruto always worked hard to prove those around him wrong. She herself used to think that he was more or less just a deadlast with a bad attitude, but over the months, she'd realized just how wrong she was, just how much she'd misjudged him. Naruto had shown so much growth over and over again, right before her eyes, dare say she even admired him now. "I'm kind of jealous, to be honest with you… Both him and Sasuke-kun have come so far over the past few months, but the only thing I've learned is tree climbing..."

She did feel happy to hear what Tsunade had said about her, but she still couldn't help but have some doubts about it all.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Sakura." Kakashi smiled softly, placing a reassuring hand on her head. Sakura looked up at him, surprised.

"While it's true you may have not learned any special ninjutsu like Sasuke or Naruto yet, you've still shown amazing growth in other ways. You've overcome impossible obstacles for somebody of your skill level and I'm more than proud to have you as my student." Kakashi said, with all sincerity.

At hearing such words from him, a sudden warmth filled Sakura's chest. It made her so… happy.

Tears welled up in her eyes, almost spilling out. However, before they could, she reached up, wiping them away. "Thank you… Kakashi-sensei."

"Don't mention it." Kakashi slightly ruffled her hair, before walking ahead. "Now, we should probably quicken our pace. We wouldn't want to be too left behind by those two, right? In fact, why don't you go and catch up with them and make sure they haven't gotten themselves into any trouble?"

And to be honest, he was still kind of worried about Naruto. On top of his recent physical ailment, it'd be really troublesome if somebody happened to come after him again like Itachi and Kisame had not too long ago.

"Right." Sakura uttered, before heading off in the direction her teammates had taken off in. She'd already looked at numerous maps for the Land of Fire before, so she had a general idea of where she was headed.

…

Naruto felt like his lungs were on fire, and due to the fact that he still was suffering the effects of blood loss, his body was undeniably weak at the moment. After about fifteen to twenty minutes, the worst wave of dizziness yet hit him like bricks.

In an instant, he felt himself miss his step, almost slipping out of consciousness and hurling towards the ground.

He barely registered Sasuke's voice calling out his name, or the small clicking sound of his tongue as the raven haired boy rushed down without hesitating to catch him right before he landed.

Sasuke skid across the dirt, skinning his elbow while he was at it.

"Naruto… What's *with* you today?" Sasuke asked, looking down at him, undeniable worry consuming him against his wishes. Even a blind person could tell that something was horribly wrong. Naruto was never one to nearly pass out after barely doing anything. "This isn't like you."

"...'s nothing… Jus' give me… a minute..." Naruto weakly said between breaths, trying to ignore that part of his vision was growing heavy and black. He cursed himself for having to be rescued by Sasuke, but knew he was too weak to do anything until he recovered his strength, and, of course, his breath.

As Sasuke sat there with Naruto, he wondered what he should do.

Tanzaku town isn't that far from here. I'll probably let him rest for a few minutes and if one of the others don't get here by then, I'll take him there myself.

Much to his relief, however, he didn't have to wait long, because, almost immediately after, Sakura had finally caught up with him, calling out his name.

"Sasuke-kun, how's Naruto? Did he pass out?" Sakura asked in concern, jumping down beside him and Naruto.

"See for yourself." Sasuke said, masking nonchalance.

"Heh, I'm still conscious,... if that's what you're asking…" Naruto looked up at her, giving a weak smile. "I said before I don't go out that easy, didn't I…?"

"And that's why you're laying on the ground right now, you idiot." Sasuke quipped. "You're lucky that I was here to catch you when you fell, or you probably would have broken your neck."

"Shut up, *teme...* !" Naruto snapped.

"...Naruto… You reckless dumbass!" Sakura shouted, startling both Naruto and Sasuke. "Both Kakashi-sensei and I told you to not over-exert yourself right now, but instead, you immediately rushed off and nearly fainted again! Haven't you ever heard of following directions...?!"

"...I'm sorry, Sakura-chan… I guess I kind of should have listened to you..." Naruto murmured after a moment, looking away, feeling horrible for making her worry about him.

Sakura sighed, feeling kind of guilty for being so hard on him. "Don't apologize… I'm just glad you're okay…"

A/N: You may think this is overly dramatic, but this kind of thing happens when somebody cuts too much or they lose too much blood(it happened to me, and I felt major light-headedness and nearly passed out several times in my life, so I was basing Naruto's experience off of my own past symptoms.) Also, it can sometimes take a long time to recover from blood loss, whether or not the injury is healed, so considering how Naruto has been bleeding on a regular basis(supposedly every few days, lately more), he's not been giving his body enough time to recuperate and considering how much he lost this time, it only made it a shit ton worse where it's actually a hundred times more noticable. As for Sasuke and Sakura, they still don't know what's wrong, but they're starting to suspect something, and I do plan to have the reveal soon enough. Please forgive me. I'm trying to take as realistic of an approach as I can on this without dragging the matter on too long. Forgive me please…

Chapter 7

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 7
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

I hope you all like this chapter... Yikes, I'm feeling so insecure right now...

…

It didn't take long to get to Tankazu Town from where Naruto had nearly passed out at. Kakashi took everybody to a hotel to pay for four rooms for a single nights stay. Normally, he wouldn't have bought out for a night this early, but the next town over was quite a ways and Naruto was clearly in no condition to be moving around much.

After he'd got the room keys from the lady at the head desk, he turned to the others

"Sakura, you'll be getting your own room." Kakashi said, handing her the room key, before looking at his other two students, handing the key to Sasuke. "Naruto and Sasuke, you two will have to share one. And *you* two will be sharing a room as well."

Right as Kakashi gave Izumi a key, Naruto, as expected, wasn't just going to sit still without protesting to the placement.

"What? Why do I have to share a room with Sasuke?!" Naruto demanded. "Why can't I have my own room or something?"

"Because I said so, Naruto." Kakashi sighed. "Just do as I asked, please…"

"Yeah, believe me. The last thing I want to do is share a room with *you*, but I'd rather not focus on it anymore than I have to. So just get over it already, *dobe*." Sasuke muttered, starting to walk off towards the room number listed on his key.

"Hmph…" Naruto folded his arms, irritated. "If it was with Sakura-chan, I wouldn't mind, but-" Naruto started to say, but was cut off when Sakura gave him a small smack in the back of his head.

"Don't even *think* about it, Naruto." She scolded him. "Just do what Kakashi-sensei said. And get some rest while you're at it."

"Fine…! Fine…!" Naruto groaned, before following after Sasuke. He was still kind of feeling sick anyway. It wouldn't hurt to sleep it off a bit.

Their room number was a couple halls down, but not particularly far, so it was easy to find. Sasuke gave Naruto a brief, unreadable glance, before unlocking the room and opening it for both of them to enter.

"Hmph, just don't talk to me, *usuratonkachi*… I'm going to lay down for a while." Sasuke said, throwing his bag down beside one of the beds in the room, sitting on its soft surface and

taking off his shoes. Due to his nightmares as of late, he hadn't been getting much sleep, so he would be lying if he said he wasn't tired. Besides, it wasn't like they were going anywhere.

"I hadn't *planned* on it…" Naruto muttered bitterly, going to the other side of the room and laying his bag on the floor as well. Well, at least he wasn't having to share a *bed* with Sasuke as well.

He sighed, deciding to lay down himself. It actually didn't take long to drift off to sleep.

However, at some point later on, he was suddenly jolted awake by loud moaning. He looked over to see Sasuke tossing and turning in his bed.

Was he… having a nightmare?

"…Sasuke…?" he called out, hesitantly.

When there was no reply, he got up and approached his rival's sleeping body. The raven haired boy's eyebrows were creased. Clearly, whatever the dream was, it must have been bad for it to get him this upset. Could it have something to do with his past…? Nonetheless, he didn't like seeing him like this.

What should I do…?

"…Hey…, Sasuk-" he reached out to touch Sasuke's shoulder in an attempt to wake him up, but was caught off guard when Sasuke suddenly leaped out of bed, grabbing his neck in a choke hold. His sharingan was activated, and he was glaring. Not *at* him though, it was more like past him.

"*Teme*, what are you doing…? It's *me*." Naruto choked out, struggling to breathe and break Sasuke's hard grip.

After a moment, Sasuke seemed to once again become aware of his surroundings. His eyes widened when he realized what he was doing.

"Naruto…" He uttered, before letting go and sitting back down on the bed, his bangs shadowing his eyes.

"What the hell was that for?! I woke you up because you were having a nightmare and you tried to strangle me!" Naruto demanded an explanation.

Sasuke glared at the floor. He hadn't intended to hurt Naruto. But that damn nightmare again… *Itachi*…

"Hey, did you hear me?! I asked for an explanation!" Naruto shouted, hating to be ignored, grabbing him by his collar.

"…It's *nothing*...! Just drop it already, *Naruto!*" Sasuke spat, slapping Naruto's arm away. His eyes, even though his Sharingan was no longer activated, were colder than he'd ever seen them before. The Uchiha then lied back down, his back turned to the blonde.

Naruto bit his lip, but decided to not press the matter any further. “Damn it… Whatever…, I’m going to go and see if I can find a restaurant in the area…”

He seemed to be feeling a lot better than he was earlier(minus for his agitation due to a *certain* someone), so that was a good sign.

He slipped on his shoes and left the room, rubbing his neck where it was still sore at. Clearly, Sasuke hadn’t meant to attack him, but it still pissed him off.

“Oh, Naruto, you’re finally awake. Feeling better now?”

Naruto looked up to see Kakashi standing there.

“Yeah, I feel great!” Naruto smiled, before scratching his cheek awkwardly. “Sorry again for worrying everybody…”

“It’s no problem, Naruto, just take however much time you need.” Kakashi briefly stroked his head, before starting to walk off.

“Oh, Kakashi-sensei, what room is Sakura-chan in? I wanted to ask her something.” Naruto turned his attention to her.

“It’s room number eighteen.” Kakashi said.

“Great, thanks!” Naruto grinned before running off towards the right room.

Naruto hesitated for a moment once he reached her door. What if she was asleep or something…? He didn’t really want to cause any more trouble for her than he already had today. But he didn’t really feel like eating dinner alone either right now…

Well, he might as well take his chances. What was there to lose?

Naruto softly knocked on the door, swallowing. “Um, hey, Sakura-chan…?”

Suddenly, the memory of Sakura crying as she tightly hugged Sasuke in the hospital a few weeks prior flashed his mind, and he immediately considered leaving. He had no right to intrude on that, even if was only as friends. Asking Sakura to go and eat with him… That would surely be selfish of him, right? But it *was* only as friends, so it couldn’t… hurt, right…?

But-

Before he could second guess himself again, the door opened, and Sakura peeked out the door.

“Naruto? What is it?” Sakura asked, raising an eyebrow. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Yeah, I am. And um, well, I kind of wondered if you wanted to go with me to a nearby restaurant to get something to eat…?” He averted his gaze with a small blush. “It’s kind of lonely by yourself, ya know…? But if you don’t want to, I mean I’d totally understand…” Naruto made himself more awkward than ever with that question. A couple months ago, he would have had no problem at all calling it a date and indiscreetly asking her out, but now, he didn’t even know what his place was in any of it anymore. Sometimes, he almost felt like a third wheel around them even if her and Sasuke weren’t actually even *together*.

Sakura observed him, musing for a moment. Since when had Naruto been so reserved about such a thing? Originally, she’d found him asking her on dates to be annoying and intrusive to her time and personal space, but now that that he was being so… considerate of her feelings… She almost thought it was kind of cute.

Wait, what? No. Naruto was *not* cute.

And besides, she wasn’t really that excited by the prospect of going off right now. She looked away, a downcast look on her face. “Sorry, Naruto… I’m not… really feeling up to going out anywhere.”

“Oh… Alright…” Naruto forced a smile in response. He thought she might turn him down, but it still kind of hurt regardless. Of course, it wasn’t like he could really blame her. He scratched the back of his head. “It’s fine. I guess I’ll just go by myself then, or, who knows, maybe I can get Kakashi-sensei to come with me. Ha-ha… Sorry for bothering you, Sakura-chan…”

After hearing that and seeing the pained expression on Naruto’s face, Sakura felt guiltier than ever. Had he really wanted to spend time with her that badly…?

“Wait, Naruto.” She found herself calling after him without a second thought. “I guess I’ll come with you, after all.”

Who knew? It might turn out fun.

“Wait, *really*?” Naruto’s eyes lit up, and another unidentifiable feeling like she’d felt for him earlier that day entered Sakura’s chest at seeing how happy he was.

“Awesome!” The blonde grinned excitedly.

“But this isn’t a date, so don’t get any ideas.” Sakura said, sternly.

“I know, it just makes me really happy you accepted is all.” Naruto sheepishly explained.

“Alright, let me get my shoes on… I’ll be out in a minute.” Sakura gave a small smile herself, after sighing a bit. Afterwards, she closed the door to take care of her business. Naruto was left standing outside her room with a facial expression that showed he was clearly on cloud nine.

Even though it wasn’t a date, it still felt nice to know that he was going to get to spend a little bit of time with Sakura.

It didn't take but a minute for her to come back out.

"I guess Sasuke-kun didn't want to come then?" She inquired.

"No, and it's not like I would have asked him to come anyway. That bastard tried to choke me earlier…" Naruto grumbled.

"He *what*?" Sakura stared at him with wide eyes.

"Well, I mean, it wasn't really like he meant to, I think. He was having a nightmare, so I went to wake him up and that's when it happened. I'm totally fine now." Naruto said. Wait, why was he defending Sasuke…? Normally, he would have been perfectly content badmouthing him. Then again, he couldn't deny that he'd been a bit worried himself and Sakura clearly had as well.

"I see…" Sakura uttered, deep in thought, remembering back to when Sasuke had knocked the plate of chopped apples out of her hand back in the hospital. He'd had some bad outbursts lately, and in some ways, he just wasn't the same as he used to be, but to hear that he was suffering from nightmares too… she couldn't help but worry for him. Even so, Sasuke most likely wasn't in the mood to talk much right now if what Naruto said was true.

"Hey, don't worry, Sakura-chan. I'm sure he'll be alright later and everything." Naruto said, not liking to see her look so down. "I think he just needs a little bit of space right now, is all…"

Sasuke's actions still irritated him, but he did understand that Sasuke had not been himself lately, so he couldn't bring himself to hold onto his grudge for long.

"…Yeah, you're probably right." Sakura forced a smile, trying to push aside her worries. "Come on, let's go. While we're at it, we could bring Sasuke-kun back something."

"Alright, I guess so… What kind of food would he want, anyway…?" Naruto mused aloud.

"You didn't know? His favorite food is onigiri. And rice in general, actually." Sakura told him.

Of course she would know something like that…

Naruto briefly considered covering everything himself, but then, when he saw their sensei up ahead, an idea popped into his mind.

"Hey, Sakura-chan, I wonder if we can convince Kakashi-sensei to give us some money." He mischievously whispered to her.

Normally, Sakura would have scolded him, but she herself didn't really have that much on her either. It'd make so much more sense to get an adult to cover the cost.

"Let's go ask him." She gave a small smirk, playing along with his idea.

Kakashi, who was walking down the hall reading his book, looked up when he saw them coming towards him.

“Kakashi-sensei, we need to ask a favor.”Naruto said.

“Hm? What’s up, you two?” Kakashi rose an eyebrow. They didn’t really look like they were up to anything bad, but…

“We wanna go somewhere to eat and we kind of need some money.” Sakura chimed in.

“Why not just go to the cafeteria? Or order a plate? Meal costs come with the expenses of the hotel stay.” Kakashi pointed out.

“But it’s not the same!” Naruto argued back, whining.

“He’s right. And I want umeboshi or some dumplings! I doubt they’ll have anything like that in there. Not to mention we were already planning to get Sasuke-kun some onigiri, so it’d work out perfect.” Sakura said.

“Please, Kakashi-sensei?” both her and Naruto said in unison.

Kakashi observed their pleading eyes, before sighing and caving in to their request.“Fine… How much is it you’re wanting…?”

Naruto and Sakura shared a brief glance, smiling, before Naruto spoke up. “How about 300 ryo?”

Kakashi was about to protest, but once again, he gave in. However, instead of handing them 300, he handed them a 500 ryo bill. “Fine… Here, see if you can pick me up some salt-broiled saury while you’re at it. Either that or some miso soup with egg plant would be nice.”

“Alright, thanks, Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto and Sakura smiled running off.

He sighed again. Why did his students have to be like that…? When it came to them, he *always* had a soft spot for them. Briefly, he wondered if Minato ever felt this way around him, Obito and Rin… Would he have been able to turn them down if he were in *his* position right now…?

They really are something else, those three…

…

It was sunset when Sakura and Naruto came outside, the sky tinged with a dull mix of orange and purple. A pleasant evening chill had set in, making the temperature just right in comparison to the blaring heat from earlier.

“Wow, the temperature’s perfect now. At least much better than it was earlier.” Sakura noted.

“Huh, I hadn’t even noticed, but you’re totally right! That heat was *unbearable*…!” Naruto said.

“Come to think of it, I wonder how Kakashi-sensei even tolerates wearing such clothes when it’s like that.” Sakura mused, putting a finger to her lip in deep thought. “You’d think they were insolated or something.”

“Yeah, especially his mask…!” Naruto added.

“True… And we still don’t even know what’s underneath it…” Sakura murmured, a little dejected.

“Hmm… I wonder if it’s some kind of scar or curse mark that he doesn’t want others to see…” Naruto pondered it.

“Good question…” Sakura uttered. For a long moment, she was silent as she thought back to the curse more on Sasuke’s neck. If it was a curse mark he was hiding, could it be anything like that one…? What was Kakashi keeping from them…?

She gave a small smile, deciding it was best not to obsess over it for the time being.

“Well, it’s not like we’ll get any answers by just thinking about just thinking about it, so let’s focus on what’s in front of us. If you don’t mind me asking, what are you planning on getting…?” She asked him curiously.

“Hmm… I’m not sure yet. Probably some Miso, if I can find some.” Naruto pondered it absentmindedly. “It’s too bad there’s no Ichiraku Ramen shop out here.”

“You and your ramen.” Sakura gave an exasperated look. “Don’t you ever eat anything else besides that? You need vegetables and healthy foods in your diet, Naruto. You can’t live on sodium alone, you know.”

“First, Kakashi-sensei, and now *you too*, Sakura-chan…?” Naruto groaned. “It’s not just noodles and broth… There’s chasu too and even egg.”

“You really don’t get it, *do* you…?” Sakura sighed. Oh well, what could she do? It *was* Naruto she was talking about…

“Besides, you’re the one who likes the dango and umeboshi…” Naruto pointed out. “You can’t exactly call those healthy foods either.”

“Hey, it’s not like I eat that every day or anything!” Sakura’s face flushed defensively, pouting a bit. “I just so happened to like sweet things, is all…”

“I know. I just thought it would be kind of funny to tease you about it.” Naruto laughed a bit.

“…! Well, don’t do it again!” Sakura huffed, before turning on her heel and trotting off towards a nearby restaurant she spotted in her peripheral vision.

“Huh? Sakura-chan, wait…! That didn’t make you angry, did it! I didn’t mean to upset you, I swear! Sakura-chan-“

"Just drop it already…!" Sakura spat, trying her best to ignore the way her face was heating up. Why was she feeling this way around him…? Come to think of it, she'd slowly been finding herself seeing him in a different light in general lately. And something had just... changed. She'd started thinking back to all the times he'd helped her, inspired her, encouraged and cheered her on, even protected her and it really… made her happy. And yet, she still couldn't place what it was she was feeling right now.

Whatever, it didn't matter, she quickly told herself, to avoid thinking about it too heavily.

Naruto followed her into the restaurant, and fortunately most of what they came there for was there, except for the ramen Naruto wanted.

"What???! No miso or noodles??!" Naruto exclaimed, causing some people to look up to see what the commotion was. "What kind of restaurant doesn't serve noodles?! This place is lame."

"Keep it down, Naruto…! You're going to catch the attention of everybody here…!" Sakura scolded him, before looking up and humbly apologizing to everybody around for the disruption.

She then sighed when they looked away when Naruto grumbled an apology at her insistence.

After that, they were asked what they wanted. Naruto reluctantly opted for a spiced tonkatsu bowl while Sakura went with coconut shrimp and umeboshi, on top of that, they both asked for water.

They were directed to a seat to wait in the meantime. It didn't take long for a waitress to come by. However, only Sakura seemed to notice the small gasp that exited the woman's mouth when she approached them, or even the way she almost seemed to slam down Naruto's tray and glass of water in front of him versus how much nicer she was towards Sakura. Only she seemed to notice the glare directed at her grinning blonde teammate.

"Thanks." Naruto smiled, trying to pretend he wasn't bothered. He was used to this kind of thing in the village after all. It wasn't a surprise that there were people, even out here, who recognized his face.

"Don't mention it." The woman muttered, walking off.

Anger boiled within Sakura in that moment at seeing Naruto treated so harshly, and she was almost prepared to beat the woman up herself. But she knew it wouldn't do any good to get kicked out of a restaurant.

"Naruto… Wh-" Sakura started to broach the subject that had been bothering her for a while – why? Why people looked at him that way.

However before she could finish, he interrupted her.

“Come on, Sakura-chan, let’s eat. We wouldn’t want our meals to get cold, you know?” Naruto smiled weakly, as if he hadn’t even heard or was trying to avoiding giving her a chance to question it. It was then that Sakura could tell. Naruto had something that he didn’t want her or anybody else to know. Something big. And it was causing him pain.

She couldn’t stand being kept in the dark like this anymore. Naruto was her *friend*.

“Naruto,” She said more sternly this time. “why do people always *treat* you that way…? It’s not like you did anything wrong, right…?”

“…It’s...” At hearing her question, he averted his gaze, feeling his anxiety getting the best of him again. A small part of him wanted to trust her, to open up and tell her everything, he couldn’t stand worrying her like this. But the mere idea of her possible reaction and her hating him… It terrified him. He couldn’t risk it, no matter what. It was better to put the matter off as long as he could. And so, unknowingly, he told her basically the same exact thing Sasuke had told her earlier that day: “It’s nothing, Sakura-chan… Don’t worry about it. Just focus on yourself. I’m sure you have enough issues going anyway, right?”

“But, Naruto, it’s *you* I’m concerned abo-“ Sakura tried once more to get him to open up, not satisfied with his answer. However, the next words that came out of his mouth shut her up entirely.

“*Please...*” He plead.

He was *begging* her to not press the matter any further. And the look in his eyes told the whole story.

He was *scared. Whatever it was,* he was afraid of her finding out.

Sakura bit her lip and looked down at her food after that, momentarily deciding to drop the matter. She didn’t want to upset him anymore than already clearly was at the moment.

However, the mood of dinner had, over all, been ruined for the both of them, and not much was said following that.

They stayed there about another twenty minutes, silently eating their food, after which they payed for two to go plates with salt-broiled saury in one for Kakashi and omusubi with okaka in the other for Sasuke.

And, once again, not much was said heading home, until Naruto suddenly spoke up, surprising Sakura.

“Sorry about earlier, Sakura-chan…” He said, looking away with a guilty expression. “I kind of ruined dinner…”

“Hey, don’t worry about it…” Sakura said, smiling a bit. “I didn’t really help make things much better myself.”

“Even so… I’m still happy you came with me…” Naruto said, a bit awkwardly. “It really meant a lot to me, ya know…?

“Well, I wouldn’t do it all the time, but we should spend some time together like this again one day. I had fun.” Sakura said, lightheartedly.

“Really? You mean it?” Naruto looked up at her, grinning.

“Mh-hm.” Sakura smiled.

“Alright! I’ll be looking forward to it!” Naruto beamed. “Anyway…, we should probably get this stuff on up to Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke, before it gets cold.”

“Right.” Sakura agreed, but suddenly, she thought back to the woman at the restaurant, and without thinking she reached out and grabbed his arm. “Wait, Naruto…”

She couldn’t help but feel a little concerned when he flinched at her touch. It was just like earlier, but he seemed to react even harder this time. Was he injured…?

“Huh? What is it, Sakura-chan…?” Naruto inquired, trying his best to regain his composure.

“Is there something… bothering you…? You know you can trust me, right…?” Sakura asked him, just as she’d tried to encourage Sasuke to open up to her as well.

At hearing the word ‘trust’, Naruto became hesitant, once again, wanting to spill everything out that had been on his mind, to open up about everything. However, once again, he forced himself to stop out of fear of rejection, and opted to reassure her that nothing was wrong. He didn’t to burden her with his problems, it would only be selfish of him.

“Hey, it’s like I told you before, Sakura-chan. I’m totally fine, so, really, there’s no need to worry about me, okay?” He told her, trying his best to ignore the anxiety that was *once again* crawling its way up into his chest and stomach.

Sakura looked uncertain, she clearly didn’t buy it, but decided to not press the matter any further for now. “…If you say so…”

…

“Oh, good, you two are back. Did you get what I asked for?” Kakashi was quick to greet them.

“Yeah, but they didn’t have the miso soup, so we had to get the Salt-broiled Saury instead. Here’s the left over money.” Sakura said, handing him the remaining ryo and his take out tray.

Kakashi couldn’t help but notice that Naruto and Sakura almost seemed kind of depressed now, unlike before.

Something must be bothering them.

“Anyway… We’re gonna go bring Sasuke-kun his tray now. Come on, Naruto.” Sakura said, not noticing the listless look on his face as her back was turned to him.

Especially, Naruto…

"Ah, right, coming…!" Naruto immediately ran after her, leaving Kakashi wondering if he should talk to him. In the end, he figured it probably wasn't anything that big, even if it was a little disconcerting. He'd just wait it out. If they were still like that in the morning, he'd talk to them then.

…

"Good evening, Sasuke-kun, we got you something. It's your favorite. Onigiri with okaka!" Sakura entered the room with Naruto when Sasuke opened it up for them. "We thought you might want something since you haven't eaten anything all day, so we-"

"I'm not hungry… Just put it by my bedside or something." Sasuke, who'd long since changed into some night clothes, muttered, barely acknowledging her. Due to the nightmares as of late, he truthfully hadn't really felt like eating much of anything at all, least of all right now. He would probably just end up throwing it up in the mental state he was in right now. Maybe he'd eat a rice ball later if he felt like it.

"Oh, okay…" Sakura said, looking down, as she did as asked. "Are you sure… you're not hungry…?"

"No, I'm not. Just drop it." Sasuke said curtly, making it clear he had no intentions of indulging her.

"…Alright…" she uttered, barely above a whisper.

"Sakura-chan-" Naruto reached out to stop Sakura when she turned to leave.

"I'm going on to bed." Sakura looked back at him with a forced smile. "Make sure to get some good sleep tonight, Naruto, so you'll be fully rested in the morning… Good night, Sasuke-kun."

After that, Naruto couldn't even bring himself to go after her. However, within an instance, Naruto found himself approaching Sasuke and grabbing him by his collar. "*Teme*… Sakura-chan was worried for you, and you just blew her off like you didn't care at all!"

"Get *off* of me..." Sasuke spat, slapping Naruto's hand away. However, there was a glimpse of guilty in his eye that made it clear that was sorry for brushing off Sakura's concern, so Naruto decidedly let go. He didn't really feel like getting into a fight anyway right now.

"Fine… *Screw you*…" Naruto growled out, before heading into the bathroom after picking up his bag, which contained his *cure*, locking the door behind him. He knew this self-destructive habit of his was becoming incredibly dangerous, but he didn't even care anymore. He just needed it so bad right now, more than anything. Honestly, he couldn't wait until this damned mission was over already.

He could hardly tolerate Sasuke at all and he was so afraid of somebody finding out either one of this secrets, and the woman at the restaurant only served as a reminder that he wasn't

safe from those harsh glares no matter where he went. And Sakura … He'd only been stressing her out since they left the village. On top of that, if Kakashi found out about him cutting himself, he would undeniably have to get somebody else, like Tsunade, involved, and, worse than that, he'd probably end up in the hospital under surveillance and that was the *last* thing he wanted.

Well, he'd just have to do his best to keep it hidden.

…

It wasn't long before he realized he'd taken the wrong sleeping shirt.

Of course it would be a short sleeved one.

Looks like he'd just have to wear his jacket to bed, as annoying as it was.

So that's what he did, exiting the bathroom.

Maybe Sasuke wouldn't notice.

"You're wearing your jacket to bed…?"

No such luck.

Sasuke was raising an eyebrow, clearly a tad taken aback. There weren't very many people who slept in their jacket in bed, unless one, they were too tired or two, they were trying to hide something.

"So what if I am? It's none of your business, *teme*." Naruto grumbled.

After that, Sasuke didn't respond.

And to be honest, he probably would have pushed it to the side as just some odd quirk of Naruto's if it wasn't for finding bloodied bandage wrap disposed in the trashcan a couple hours later. Perhaps, Naruto had been too dazed at the time to make a proper attempt to hide them.

But it was because of that that everything began to piece together.

Near fainting spells, pale skin, flinching at being touched, bloodied bandage wraps, even the pattern of the blood on the wraps… and going as far as to sleep in his jacket as if he was trying to hide something… The only thing he was missing… it was the weapon.

Fear for Naruto's safety started to consume him.

Shit… If that idiot has been doing what I think he's been doing and he continues… It could really kill *him...*

What should I do?

Should I tell Kakashi-sensei…? Or maybe I should talk to Sakura instead...

No, I need to confirm my suspicions first, so I'll have to confront him myself *before anything else...*

…

A/N: Hoooooly shit, this took forever. We're finally getting to the matter at hand... I hope you all liked this, and I really hope you didn't mind the NaruSaku stuff. I didn't want to make the chapter all about that and like I said I want this to be slow build, so I tried to make it NaruSaku without it actually being NaruSaku yet. Naruto is trying to respect Sakura's feelings. And Sakura will slowly start dealing with a small delima due to having had feelings for Sasuke. I know many write Sasuke as a jerk to make Naruto and Sakura get together, but I don't really want to go that route(even if it may have seemed a little like it in this chapter). I want Sakura to move on from her feelings for Sasuke in more of a natural way, while still writing Sasuke as a traumatized boy who learns to open up again and see those around him as his family. His concern for Naruto, his best friend, will be a major push for that as will Sakura and Kakashi.

I hope you all will stick with me on this...

Chapter 8

Story: Melancholy, Chapter 8
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

Sasuke and Kakashi were hard as hell for me to write in this chapter, and there's a lot of BPD projection here with Naruto, so I apologize.

Replies to Reviews:

WheelOfDawn on Chapter 7:

Looking forward to the next chapters! Really liking Sakura in your story, everyone else tends to bash her a bit. So even if I'm not fond of her usually she seems good in your story! Cutting really is a monster that creeps up on you at your worst moments, promising relief from your current feelings, then just making everything even more stressful with having to hide it and the effects. Looking forward to your next chapter.

I always like putting focus on Sakura's softer side in stories, and seeing it(even in canon), and I've actually had a lot of fun writing for her, so I'm glad you're enjoying it. And yes, I completely agree! Self-harm is like a drug, it doesn't just go away immediately. It can take a long time to truly work through it. And having people to support you is a big thing. Naruto really needs that right now.

AnaMariaNi on Chapter 7:

Woooo hoooo! Sasuke is geting a hang of what is going on. Hmmm. What will you do now Sasuke, what will you do...?

He's definitely concerned! ;w;

hades_bitch on Chapter 7:

I wonder what will happen when they all realize the trauma they're going through...
I like how you're keeping sasuke not jerky, but maybe defensive is the right word?
I dont mind the NaruSaku things, it keeps the story interesting.
Thanks for your hard work, cant wait for more!! 💚

Recovery will happen! I'm having a lot of fun writing out the dynamics thus far and team 7 will be a big support to each other once all secrets are on the table. And yes, Sasuke is just defensive, and in my opinion, he just has some interpersonal emotional issues due to his trauma and that will take time to resolve.

And yeah, there aren't a whole lot of good NaruSaku fanfictions out there in comparison to some of the other more popular pairings, so I really wanted to write one in a way that still does Sasuke's character justice! I'm glad you're enjoying it!

...

“Naruto, wake up.”

Naruto opened his eyes to see Sasuke standing there in front of him. Immediately, agitation entered his chest.

“What do you want *this* time? If you can’t tell, I’m trying to sleep…” He grumbled.

Sasuke was never one to particularly beat around the bush, so he had no problem being blunt and getting straight to the point.

“Show me your arms.” He said. While it wasn’t in a hostile tone, and it was more neutral, there was still an edge to it that made it clear he wasn’t playing around.

“What? Why?” Naruto’s eyes flared for a moment and his heart skipped a beat. Sasuke *knew* ? No, he couldn’t possibly-

“There’s no use hiding it. I already know. I saw the bandages in the bathroom.” Sasuke said simply.

Oh, shit, of course!

The bloodied bandages he had thrown into the trash can. He’d been too dazed from blood loss to properly think to hide them and, due to living alone, he’d fallen into the habit of just throwing them into the trashcan without a second thought, so that hadn’t helped at all.

Great.

"…Well, it's not like I'm trying to kill myself or anything. So just mind your own business, *teme* …" Naruto glared at him before averting his gaze, cursing himself for not being able to hide it better. Just as he hadn't wanted to wrap Sakura up in his problems, he certainly hadn't wanted to get Sasuke involved either.

Having his suspicions pretty much confirmed, Sasuke felt a bit of irritation. "Really…? And what is it you're proposing I do *instead* …? Am I supposed to just stand by and ignore everything while you continue *cutting* yourself...?!"

At this point, Sasuke lost his cool, grabbing Naruto by his collar just as Naruto had done to him hours prior. "Is that what you had in mind?!"

Naruto's eyes widened at hearing Sasuke's words, the look of betrayal in the Uchiha's eyes striking him to his core. Suddenly, he felt sick to his stomach.

Even so, it didn't matter what Sasuke thought. He *needed* this. It was his only escape from the inner turmoil he felt every day. Sasuke had no right to interfere with that. "Yeah, that's *exactly* what I'm asking you to do!"

Blue pain-filled irises met dark conflicted ones, before the rivals momentarily broke eye-contact, Sasuke barely managing to regain his composure. "…It looks like I was right… You need help, Naruto... Maybe Kakashi will know what to do."

After all, he himself had only made things worse up to this point and wasn't in the proper state of mind to really try to talk things out with him. Right as he started to head towards the door, however, Naruto creased his eyebrows defensively, fear at the idea of Kakashi or Sakura getting involved completely consuming his sense of reasoning.

"Hey, it's not like I'm the only one that's been pushing others away, ya know! You have no right to fault *me* for anything when you've been doing the same thing!" the blonde shouted.

Stopping in his tracks, Sasuke clinched his fist. Naruto wasn't wrong... Due to the influence of the nightmares and his last encounter with Itachi, he had been putting a lot distance between himself and others, especially Sakura and Naruto. A pang of guilt once again weighed on his chest when he recalled Sakura's depressed voice as she'd left their room after he'd rejected her offer for dinner, as well as how he'd even tried to choke Naruto earlier in surprise.

…However, what Naruto was doing was not healthy at all. Intervention was necessary in this matter.

He looked back at Naruto(who was at his back and fully prepared to start a fight), an undeterred look on his face.

"Then tell me this, Naruto… Who's the guy that's been hurting himself and collapsing from blood loss, because I sure as hell know it isn't *me* ! Furthermore, since you apparently forgot, Sakura's been worried about you too, you idiot…!" He snapped. He knew he shouldn't be raising his voice against somebody who had been self-harming, but he couldn't stop himself;

he hadn’t been able to hold back his concern ever since he'd basically received confirmation on what Naruto was doing to himself. The truth was, he was *terrified* .

“I…!” Naruto started to open his mouth to speak, but immediately after shut it, unable to come up with a proper retort. He knew deep down that Sasuke was right. Sakura and Kakashi had went out of their way for him over and over again today, Sasuke had even had to save him earlier, yet he’d just… made everything a hundred times worse.

An uncomfortable silence settled between them until they were startled by a knock on the door and Kakashi’s voice frantically calling out for them:

“Sasuke, Naruto, what’s going on in there?” He asked.

“Don’t tell me you two are fighting again…!” Sakura demanded, sounding exasperated.

Sasuke wasted no time in opening the door for them, as Naruto made no attempt to stop him at this point, already knowing that he’d lost the fight now that Kakashi and Sakura were here.

“...Is… everything alright in here? You-” Kakashi started to ask, gazing between the two, but was cut off by Sasuke, who got straight to the point without hesitation.

“…Naruto’s been cutting himself.” He told them. In truth, a part of him didn’t want to say it around Sakura, for the worry it would surely cause her, but… Naruto needed as much support as he could get right now and hiding such a thing from her for very long would be unnecessarily tedious anyway. “That’s why he collapsed earlier.”

“What…? Wait, you don’t mean…?” Sakura murmured, shuttering at the realization. Worried, she turned her attention to Naruto, who was unable to look her in the eye.

“…Well, I suppose that *would* explain a thing or two… Even so…" Kakashi tried his best to stay calm and think about how to most rationally approach the situation at this point. He understood that reacting negatively would just end up making everything worse, especially considering that Sasuke and Naruto had already been arguing over it. He reached up to pat Naruto, who seemed wound up as it was, on the head. Naruto reflexively tensed up as if he was going to be hit, but relaxed after a moment, he found himself surprised by his teacher's gentle touch. "Everybody needs to calm down… Getting upset at Naruto isn’t going to do any of us any good.”

Sasuke immediately looked away with a troubled look, knowing he was right.

Kakashi squatted down so he was around about eye-level with his blonde student. “...Naruto, I'm going to have to take a look at your injuries… I'm not mad, I promise. I just need to know how bad they are.”

"I…" Naruto hesitantly glanced up at Kakashi, but the urge to show him his injuries left, almost as soon as it came, and fear entered his senses. He took a step back, holding a hand to his raw arm to calm the anxieties in his chest.

“Naruto…?” Kakashi cautiously took step towards the boy, who once again stepped back, his eyes darting from side to side.

"..."m sorry… I can't… I..." *I'm afraid* . Naruto was starting to panic, his breathing and heartbeat becoming erratic. He could feel everybody's eyes on him and he couldn't stand it.

He'd been trying his hardest to hide this ever since it started, he hadn't wanted any of them to find out or worry about him over it. If they saw the cuts, the would surely judge him. They would hate him; think he was weak. Sasuke would mock him, Sakura would get angry at him for causing everybody so much trouble. Kakashi would be disappointed… And they wouldn't want to be associated with him anymore. They-

"Naruto, please calm down. You're not in any trouble. I just need to make sure your cuts aren't infected." Kakashi tried to reason with him, reaching out towards him again. However, at this point, Naruto wasn't thinking rationally enough to really hear him, and flinched, pulling in on himself.

"No… I- I..." Shaking his head 'no', the boy started backing up, gasping for air, and desperately clawing at the bandages that were binding his injuries, staining his fingers in crimson. Kakashi's words weren't registering anymore, and his thoughts weren't even straight. All he knew in that moment was that he needed blood, right *now.*

Sasuke stood back, eyes wide. He'd seen Naruto do a lot of reckless things before, but he'd never seen him like... *this* . He wanted to react, to do something for his friend, to stop him from hurting himself and tearing his skin to pieces, but his body was frozen in its place. There was nothing he could do to help, because he'd just make everything worse if he tried to get involved, just like he did earlier. Besides, Kakashi probably had a better idea than anybody else here on what to do, right? He *had* to.

On the *contrary, actually.*

Kakashi himself was honestly at just as much of a loss on how to deal with Naruto as Sasuke was at the moment. Seeing the blood… It was a cold harsh reminder of how his father had stabbed himself and committed suicide. Naruto wasn't using a weapon right now, but he didn't know if he had one on him, so he needed to avoid doing anything hasty and scaring Naruto more than he already had. He could restrain him, but - if he wasn't careful about it - that could risk Naruto making his injuries even worse than he would have otherwise. If he had a choice in the matter, he would prefer to take a more gentle approach to talk Naruto out of it, to calm him down, at least to the point he wasn't hyperventilating anymore.

"Listen to me... We're not your enemies. We're not going to hurt you... You just need to try and take slower breaths, alright…?" He asked softly, slowly trying to approach him again.

However, Naruto still continued digging into his arm, as if he didn't even hear him.

Kakashi sighed.

...Well, I didn't want to have to use force, but it looks like I may have no other choice...

Sakura had been watching what was going on as well and was largely concerned, tears falling from her eyes. She couldn't help but think back to the fear she'd felt when Naruto had stabbed his hand on the journey to Nami no Kuni. She'd scolded him and even joked about him being a masochist back then, but he'd only done it to get the poison out, she never imagined that there was more to that matter than met the eye and her level of worry now was on a whole different level.

She couldn't stand seeing Naruto like this. She had to do *something* . This wasn't the happy boy who'd inspired her and pushed her forward when times were tough; the one with the crazy dream of becoming Hokage, who she now found herself supporting in that goal. This wasn't the hyperactive knucklehead who she'd slowly warmed up to the presence of. This was a boy who'd been suffering by himself for far too long and even hurting himself because he felt like there was no other way to deal with it, too afraid to let others in...

I have to do something for Naruto. I can't just stand here anymore while he's hurting himself like this.

That was all she knew in the moment.

So, trying her best to wipe away her freely falling tears, she found herself approaching her panicking teammate(right as Kakashi was preparing to get physical himself since the calm and rational method hadn't been working thus far) and did the only thing she could think to - she hugged him.

"...It's okay, Naruto..." She said in a choked up heartbroken voice, softly resting her hand at the back of his head. "...You're not alone anymore. You have me, and Sasuke-kun, and even Kakashi-sensei now… We're all here for you… So please… Please stop this…"

At first, Naruto had fearfully jumped at the sudden touch, but, after a moment, he slowly began to relax into the embrace. Her touch… It was so… comforting…

A indescribable warmth entered his chest, slowly calming him down.

Kakashi relaxed a bit, glad to see Naruto hadn't reacted badly to it. In some cases, hugging somebody who was having a panic attack could actually have the opposite effect than intended. It just so happened that Naruto was one of those who actually *needed* it.

"...Sakura-chan, I…" Naruto uttered, his breathing finally starting to regulate, as he looked over at both Kakashi and Sasuke. Guilt for falling to pieces in front of them started to consume him. "I'm sorry… I shouldn't have-"

"...What are you apologizing for?" Sakura immediately pulled back at hearing his words, with a pained smile, looking up at him with concerned eyes, and trying her damndest to tear her focus away from his blood stained sleeve and arm. "There's nothing to be sorry for."

"But I worried you all again… I'm always causing you guys trouble… Always screwing everything up… I-" Naruto looked away, trying to bite back tears. Suddenly, he felt more feint than he had in the entire day and collapsed in her arms, blood loss finally catching up with him again.

"It's alright... You've done nothing wrong. So try not to beat yourself up over it anymore. Let's just focus on getting you cleaned up, okay?" Kakashi cut him off, smiling a bit, before Naruto could continue. He couldn't stand hearing the boy degrade himself in such a way.

"But, Kakashi-sensei, I-" Naruto started to argue back in a conflicted voice. However, he could barely stand, and was holding onto Sakura for support.

"H-hey, you should lay down... Alright...?" Sakura cooed, leading him to his bed and helping him get into a comfortable position.

"...Mn…" Naruto's eyes drooped weakly, like he was on the verge of passing out.

"May I…?" Kakashi gestured, kneeling down beside him. Sasuke followed him over, sitting on the other side and although he didn't say anything, he wanted Naruto, at the very least, to know that he was there for him.

In fact, all three of them were.

"...Go 'head... Not like I can stop you anyway, ya know…" Naruto mumbled, still refusing eye contact and letting his bangs somewhat shadow his eyes, but was no longer putting up a fight. He was too weak to fight now anyway, even if he *wanted* to.

So Kakashi did as was permitted, pulling a clean bandage roll out of his weapon pouch. He was glad he hadn't changed clothes yet or it would have put an unnecessary delay on the matter.

"I'll go get some paper towels." Sakura volunteered, heading to the bathroom and retrieving some paper towels that she'd dampened under luke warm water in the sink.

Kakashi placed the bandage roll on the surface of the matress beside Naruto. After that, he managed to separate Naruto's arm from his sleeve, the majority of previous bandage wrap still sticking to his arm, albeit stained and doused in blood.

Sakura came back with the paper towels, handing them to Kakashi, who thanked her.

He then started to unravel the bloodied bandages on Naruto's arm, revealing countless gashes and lacerations littering his once perfect skin. His eyes widened a bit, making it clear that he was just as shocked by the damage done as Sasuke and Sakura were.

And he couldn't help but immediately feel partially to blame for it. After all, if he had payed closer attention and gotten involved sooner, maybe Naruto… wouldn't be doing this to himself right now…

Furthermore, this was his student. His Sensei's *son* , and yet he had failed him. He'd failed to be there for him when he needed somebody the most, and it had gotten so bad that he had even started cutting himself to deal with everything alone. Kakashi knew he'd been focusing on Sasuke quite a lot lately in terms of training, but it wasn't out of prejudice against Naruto or anything, he had just... felt like Jiraiya was a much better fit to train him instead. Had that somehow… made Naruto feel like he had nowhere else to turn?

No .

He couldn't focus on self-blame right now. He had to think in the present.

He may have lost his father to suicide; may have failed to protect Obito and Rin in the past when he needed to, but *Naruto* was right here in front of him bleeding from self-inflicted injuries covering his wrist and arm and it was up to him to bandage him up and get him the help he needed.

With that said, he couldn't let the boy continue going down this self destructive route, he refused to allow yet another precious person to die if he could help it. Naruto had his whole life ahead of him, hopes, dreams… He simply had too much potential for him to just risk losing it all like this...

With that thought in mind, he quickly forced himself to regain his composure, turning his focus back on the direct problem at hand. He tossed the old bloodied bandages aside, using the damp paper towels to gently sop up the blood surrounding Naruto's arm and some of the most recent gashes.

"...Kakashi-sensei…?" Sakura suddenly murmured, deciding to ask the question that had been nagging at her all day, already knowing that it would never get answered if it was left up to Naruto.

"Hm?" He uttered in response, urging her to speak her mind, whatever it was.

"...I was wondering about something…" Sakura said in a low voice. "I noticed that the villagers in Konoha are always glaring at Naruto…. And tonight, there was this waitress at the restaurant we went to that was really rude to him for no reason at all. She acted like she recognized him, and slammed his food down. Just tell me already, what is it that he's done that's so wrong that people feel the need to ostracize him like he's some kind of monster or something? Why do people treat him that way?"

Naruto immediately tensed up at the word 'monster', and Kakashi, then realizing what must have been the trigger for Naruto's depressive behavior earlier, averted his gaze, a bit hesitant.

Sasuke also glanced away at hearing her words. He didn't know about the situation in the restaurant - that much was new. However, he had been wondering about the villagers for quite some time himself, so a part of him was glad that Sakura asked, because he wanted to know himself. Nobody had ever told him much of anything or answered his questions about the harsh treatment often directed at Naruto, even his own family when they were still alive.

"...Well, I can't say I would particularly mind answering your question, but…" Kakashi paused for a second, after he'd finished cleaning up Naruto's arm to the best of his ability, glad to note that none of the wounds looked infected. He then reached for the new roll of bandage wrap to cover Naruto's wounds with.

"You see…, that decision isn't really mine to make. It's ultimately up to Naruto alone whether or not he *wants* you to know…" Kakashi explained, before giving Naruto an inquisitive look. "Naruto…?"

“...I..." Naruto returned the gesture with an expression full of uncertainty, debating it.

In truth, he was actually tired of hiding it from them. Should he… just let them in, after all…?

They would probably find out sooner or later anyway, right? If they didn't already suspect something as it was.

Still, the majority of him couldn't help but feel apprehensive. The mere thought of them turning their backs on him because of the thing inside of him… It was too painful to bear.

“...Just what is it you’re so afraid of…?" Sasuke's voice caught the attention of everybody in the room, since it was the first thing he'd said in quite a while. "Are you worried that we're going to shun you like the other people in the village do...? Because if that's the case, you really don't understand us at all. I'm not the type of person who just lets the words and opinions of others sway me. I make my own judgements."

"He's right, Naruto." Sakura added in a soft voice, giving a small smile, as she cupped his free hand in hers, noticing him fidgeting. "And we’re friends, aren't we...? We're supposed to support each other…"

"Sakura-chan…" Naruto murmured, looking up at Sakura. Suddenly, her words from just a little while ago replayed in his head.

"...You're not alone anymore. You have me, and Sasuke-kun, and Kakashi-sensei now… We're all here for you..."

It was at that point that something inside of Naruto cracked.

Just maybe... it would be okay, after all, if it happened on *his* terms rather than somebody else's.

He gazed up to Kakashi, as if for approval, who slightly nodded.

"They *are* your comrades, so try not to worry so much about it, Naruto." Kakashi eye smiled finally having finished bandaging his arm. "Sasuke and Sakura aren't the type who would hate you for something like that. I'm not going to force you or anything, but it has been about a year since you three got put on the same team, so maybe it's about time you told them about it. What do you think?"

Naruto needed the support of his friends right now, but before that could truly happen, Kakashi knew all too well that Sakura and Sasuke would have to hear him out more on exactly where he was coming from.

And on top of that, maybe if Sasuke found out about the nine tails, it would even offer him a bit of explanation for Naruto's rapid growth which he'd been envying, as well as the reason he

was being targeted by ones like Itachi. It was Kakashi's hope that it would settle at least some of the conflict between them.

Naruto gazed back over at Sasuke and Sakura, contemplating what to do. Finally, he told himself it was now or never, pondering Kakashi's words and trying his hardest to believe that his sensei was right and that his teammates would accept him regardless of the demon inside of him, that they wouldn't leave him.

"...Mn… yeah, maybe you're right. It is probably better if they hear it from me now rather than later from one of those villagers who hates me… I'm just..." He gave a pain-filled smile. "kinda scared, ya know…? I know it often doesn't seem like it, but I… I'm actually really happy to be a part of this team. I guess you could say it's kind of like the family I never had or something. So I just... really don't want to lose that, is all..."

Sasuke, Sakura and Kakashi gave deep thoughtful looks as they heard that. The fear of losing one's team in itself was something that all three of them could understand.

"Naruto… There isn't anything anybody could say that would make us hate you. I don't even care what the others may think, because the Naruto I know is a good person and *nothing* will change that..." Sakura said.

"Yeah, don't worry about it... To us, you still be the same *usuratonkachi* you always were." Sasuke smirked a bit, trying his best to lighten up the mood. He'd long since finally calmed down after seeing Naruto in such a terrifying state. At this point, he just wanted to be there for him, and more importantly wanted Naruto to know he didn't think of him any different than before; that he wasn't judging him. Teasing him was his way of showing that and getting Naruto to loosen up.

Naruto glared at him, but seemed to know that Sasuke meant no harm. " ...*Teme*... You're lucky I'm not in any condition to fight right now or I would have flattened your ass just now."

"Tch." Sasuke scoffed. "Just take that as an initiative to get better soon then, *dobe* ..."

That last bit seemed to surprise Naruto a bit. To be honest, he still didn't want to stop cutting himself; didn't even know if he was capable of it, but he couldn't help but feel a bit happy to know that Sasuke was trying to help him in his own way.

Elated, he gave a small smile. "Thanks, guys… That really means a lot to me..."

"So does that mean you'll tell us, then...?" Sakura urged in a soft voice. If Naruto agreed to open up about what was bothering him - the reason behind the animosity aimed at him by villagers, it would surely help her get a better idea of why he'd been cutting himself.

Naruto nodded a bit, deciding he was willing to take the risk. "...Yeah."

...

A/N: I'm not fond of how I wrote this chapter, but I did try my best.

Chapter 9

Story: Melancholy, Chapter 9

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

I hope you all like this chapter, it was very hard for me to write(especially Sasuke). (Also, read the note at the end and tell me what you think if you will.)

Replies to Reviews:

WheelOfDawn:

A very good chapter! Hopefully this is a good start in Naruto getting help and recovering. if blood loss is affecting him that much, then he would have to abuse his arms a lot, so worrying about him dying certainly is warranted. Thanks for the chapter! Nice to see Sasuke not being horrible

I*'m glad you're enjoying it! Team 7 definitely is gonna start being more active now. And yes, I considered the bloodloss thing, and I actually have an eventually plan for something related. But so much of this is based off personal experience with cutting. So I'm having happen what I feel makes the most since. And also yes, I love to write Sasuke being a good friend!*

inverted:

Its way too early to be almost crying but i can't help it

thanks for the chapter

I'm glad it's emotional for you, I'm trying my best! ^^ And no problem! :D

On to the story:

**owowowow

"...Huh?" Naruto weakly uttered, glancing over at him. "But why? I'm totally fine. I heal super fast, remember?"

"Well, it is true that you heal faster than most, but that isn't what I'm concerned about." Kakashi pointed out. "You've lost too much blood and you can barely stand right now."

Naruto opened his mouth to speak, but Sakura beat him to the chase in a gentle voice.

"He's right... You've collapsed several times today, and you're pale as could be."

"But, Sakura-chan…" Naruto started to say.

"You do look pretty bad off..." Sasuke said in a low voice.

"But I feel better, guys, really. I don't need to go to a doctor. Just give me a bit of rest and I'll be back to normal in no time." Naruto tried to excuse himself out of the situation, even though he was lying through his teeth. He didn't feel good at all, in fact. But the last thing he wanted to think about on top of that was for all of them worrying about him, and the thought of a doctor was never pleasant. It'd just be an unnecessary hold back.

"And who was the one that said he was absolutely fine while hiding the fact that he'd been hurting himself? If memory serves correct, that was you, Naruto. Nice try though." Kakashi said. It wasn't condescending, nor wasn't it judgmental. He was just making a point.

And Naruto seemed to realize that, and looked away with a dejected look, unable to come up with an argument to defend his case.

Kakashi stood up, trying to think of what to do about the clients, before coming to a decision. "Sasuke, Sakura, can I trust you two to look after our clients until Naruto and I get back?"

"Kakashi-sensei, I-" Sakura started to ask to come with him, fear for Naruto's sake consuming her, but Sasuke interrupted her.

"Yeah, you can count on us..." he said.

"But Sasuke-kun-" Sakura wanted to oppose him.

"It's alright, Sakura, I promise Naruto will be just fine." Kakashi reassured her, giving her a pat on the head. "We'll be back before you know it."

"Yeah, don't worry, Sakura-chan. I'm gonna be the Hokage one day, remember?" Naruto said after sitting up with a cheeky grin, even though he was clearly a bit uncomfortable and out of place saying it now that they knew he'd been hurting himself. "I can't die yet, ya know."

Sakura was obviously still uncomfortable herself, but hearing his words calmed her a bit nonetheless, so she gave a small and meek smile in response. "Alright, I guess I'll trust you since Kakashi-sensei's with you, but... just be careful, alright…?"

"I plan on it." Naruto gave a thumbs up.

"Alright… We should be back sometime within in the next hour, stay here and don't leave this hotel no matter what, am I clear?" Kakashi said.

Sasuke and Sakura nodded in response. "Understood."

…

It wasn't long after that that Kakashi had carried Naruto off on his back and both Sasuke and Sakura were left alone together.

Both of them were silent for a long time before Sasuke spoke up, surprising Sakura. "I had no idea… that Naruto was doing something like that until I saw the bandages… I didn't want to believe it was true…"

Sakura sat down on the bed where Naruto had been laying, before giving a down cast look. "Yeah… Naruto's been acting weird all day and he hasn't really seemed himself lately… I wish I'd figured it out sooner..."

"Yeah…" Sasuke murmured, surprising even himself. After a long moment of silence, he spoke back up. "Hey…"

"Huh?" Sakura inquired looking up at him.

"Do you think that I was bad… for telling on him…?" Sasuke looked away.

Sakura thought for a second. "What? Of course not… I mean… you were only doing what you thought was best, right…? Besides, Naruto needs us right now, so I'm glad you told us…"

"Yeah, I guess you're right…" He thought about it, before, after a moment, he continued.

"By the way… Um..." Sasuke's cheeks flushed a bit in awkwardness and surprising even himself, before looking away. "Sorry for earlier."

Sakura seemed surprised before giving a small smile. "H-hey, don't worry about it, Sasuke-kun. You don't think I'm still upset about that, do you? I'm completely fine now, really… But what's with you all of sudden?"

"...Honestly, I don't even know..." Sasuke smirked. "Tch. I guess Naruto must be rubbing off on me or something."

"It is true... He impacts practically everybody he comes across..." Sakura said fondly. "...Although… I do kind of wish you and Naruto would let me in more… You know…? You two are always pushing me away..."

Sasuke was quiet after that, but he couldn't deny what she said. He almost wanted to say something, but in the end he changed the subject. "Come on... We should probably head to the lobby to keep on look out."

"Right..."

…

Logically, Naruto knew that Kakashi didn't hate him, but deep down, he couldn't help but feel doubts about Kakashi's words to him. Something inside of him told him that his sensei was disappointed in his actions and ashamed of him. After all, he'd clearly been distrustful earlier when he said he was fine. All his life, he'd wanted people to acknowledge him, Kakashi was just one of those people. Sasuke and Sakura no less for that matter, and now they all knew one of his worst secrets.

He would be lying if he said he wasn't anxious about it all. And whether or not Kakashi said it himself, hearing them say they didn't judge him didn't exactly stop something inside of him from wanting to ask if he was upset with him and doubting his motives.

It didn't take long to reach the clinic. Kakashi was relieved to see that it was still open.

The person who greeted them was a middle aged brunette with a white doctors' cloak and brown rimmed glasses, as well as a name tag that read "Ryuchi Takeyama'. "Ah, Kakashi-san, it's been a while! How've you been?"

"I've been getting by, and yourself?" Kakashi responded with ease.

"Well, I've been doing the best I can, all things considered." Ryuchi said. "So, how can I help you?"

"Well, I've got a little problem. My student here has some self-harm injuries. Would you mind taking a look at them for me?" Kakashi asked. The ease with which Kakashi called them 'self-harm injuries' gave Naruto conflicting feelings. On one hand, he felt a tad uncomfortable about the whole situation, but yet it somehow eased his mind that Kakashi seemed to be just stating a fact, giving the vibes that he didn't think any less of him.

The man briefly met eyes with Naruto, who found himself look away immediately, still unable to deny the shame he was feeling for having been found out.

Ryuchi smiled. "Of course, why don't you two come with me?"

Naruto stayed silent, relaxing his chin on Kakashi's shoulder, drowsiness consuming him.

Kakashi followed the man into another section of the clinic where he was directed into a room and told to wait as Ryuu went to get his medical supplies. Kakashi had Naruto lay down on the stretcher that was inside of the room and sat down in the chair next to him.

Kakashi briefly eyed the bloodied bandages on his student's arm, once again recalling unpleasant memories from the past.

It wasn't as though Kakashi didn't understand why the boy would do such a thing to himself. Being in Naruto's position, *any* twelve year old might result to self-harm for a coping mechanism. And it wasn't as though he was shocked, per say. After all, Naruto was the type of person who let things bottle up for far too long, instead of showing his emotions and crying when he needed to, not to mention it was already in the description of being a ninja.

He knew he'd decided to not focus on his regrets, but that nagging guilt deep inside of him weighed on his chest against his will. *I just wish… I'd got involved sooner… Maybe I could have prevented this...*

"Um… Kakashi-sensei...?"

He looked up at hearing Naruto's voice. The boy wasn't giving eye contact and he sounded insecure, like he was unsure if he should ask what he wanted to.

"What is it, Naruto...?" Kakashi asked.

"Well, um… Are you sure you're not mad at me...?" Naruto wanted to know. Logically, he knew Kakashi wasn't, but that didn't stop his worry from once again returning.

Kakashi shook his head, giving the same statement he had earlier that night. "No... Nobody's mad at you right now... We're all just very concerned for you… If you don't mind me asking… Is this because of the villagers...?"

Naruto was silent for long moment and Kakashi almost didn't expect him to respond but was relieved when he finally spoke up.

"...It's hard sometimes, ya know…? Knowing that no matter I go… there will always be people who hate me…" Naruto didn't know where the words were coming from, nor why he was opening up but he felt the need to get his worries out, and did so without really thinking about it. "And since Jiichan died, the glares and whispers have only got worse… I can't stand it..."

Kakashi was momentarily silent, before speaking. "...I'm sorry… you've had to go through that… I can only imagine how painful it must be... but you can't keep bottling things up like this… It's not healthy… You do know that, right?"

"Of course I know…!" Naruto insisted. "But what else am I supposed to do? I always try to just tell myself things will be okay, but no matter how much I try to prove them wrong, the villagers always hate me, they act like I'm the Kyuubi. And sometimes… I can't help but start to question if they're right, after all."

Kakashi reached over to stop Naruto from fidgeting with his bandages, not liking the innuendo in his words. "Listen to me, Naruto. You may be a host, but you are *not* the Kyuubi. Regardless of what any villager or anybody else might say, you're nobody other than Naruto Uzumaki, the same old knuckle-headed ninja with the crazy dream to become Hokage one day, who also just so happens to be one of my precious students. I will *not* allow you to risk your life like this. Together with Team 7, we *will* get through this. I'm not asking you to make any promises,... but at least give us a chance will you...?"

"I… Alright… I guess I'll try..." Naruto gave a weak smile. "Thanks, Kakashi-sensei…"

"Don't mention it…" Kakashi found himself lightly ruffling the boy's hair.

This was going to be a long journey for sure, but maybe things would work out for the best somehow.

…

Soon enough, Ryuuchi came back and inspected the injuries. Fortunately, Naruto hadn't lost enough blood for him to find need for emergency medical treatment. Instead the doctor, concluded the boy just needed to stay hydrated and get some rest as well as be kept a close eye on(to make sure he didn't do such a thing again, because next time he might not be so lucky, as losing anymore blood would definitely be troublesome). However, he did volunteer to add some ointment and rebandage the wounds. Naruto reluctantly obliged.

Part of Kakashi had considered aborting the mission and going back to the village, because Naruto really needed surveillance right now. But when he proposed the idea to Naruto, the boy was vehemently apposed, so he decided to wait it out, and just do as suggested by the doctor, to keep a closer eye on Naruto for now. This mission should only take a few days more anyway. They'd be back in the village soon enough so he could just tell Tsunade about it then and she could decide what to do about the situation.

Kakashi could only hope that he would be okay until then, but Naruto had said he would try and he didn't seem to be lying, so maybe he could trust him, after all.

Then again...

…

"Oh! It's Kakashi-sensei, he's back!" Sakura was the first to greet them when Kakashi and Naruto got back to the hotel. Naruto had fallen asleep on Kakashi's back some time on the way back.

"So how is he...?" Sakura asked, with concern on her face.

"He's going to be fine." Kakashi said. "Naruto just needs some rest."

"What a relief… He's had me scared to death." Sakura sighed.

"Well, that's what he does best. He *is* Naruto, after all." Kakashi smiled a bit, looking with fondness as he carried the blonde to the hotel room he'd been in before.

"Heh, you got that right…" Sasuke muttered, seeming no less relieved.

Sakura seemed a tad surprised but smiled softly at knowing that Sasuke had been just as worried as them.

Kakashi lied Naruto on the bed. After a moment, Naruto woke up, noticing the shift in movement.

"Whoops, I guess I fell asleep. Sorry, Kakashi-sensei…" Naruto said, sheepishly.

"Don't worry about it… We're just glad you're okay." Kakashi said.

"Yeah, you nearly gave us a heart attack…" Sakura scolded lightly.

"...Oh, sorry about that, Sakura-chan." Naruto said meekly.

"Why do you keep apologizing, *Usuratonkachi*…? Just tell us what's going on…" Sasuke said, surprising all of them.

"Sasuke-kun's got a point… We want to help you, or at the very least understand what's bothering you..." Sakura said softly.

"...Well, I guess I did say I would tell you guys… I can't exactly go back on my word now, can I…? But I don't really know where to start…" Naruto averted his gaze, sitting up as he fumbled through possible explanations. He knew if he didn't tell them now, he'd probably never have the courage to tell them again. "...You know about the Kyuubi, right…?"

"Kyuubi…? That was the demon fox that attacked the village twelve years ago, right? The Yondaime sacrificed himself to kill it, right? What about it?"

"Well, that's the thing… It's not exactly dead." Naruto said.

"Wait, it's not?" Sakura inquired for a further explanation.

"What do you mean it's not dead?" Sasuke wanted to know.

Naruto pulled in on himself a bit. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all. What if-

Naruto relaxed a bit when Kakashi rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He decided he might as well just get straight to the point instead of beating around the bush any further.

"Well, the truth is… I don't really know how to explain it, but... The Yondaime sort of used a jutsu to seal that beast inside of me when I was a baby... So I act as a sort of container for the same beast who destroyed the village back then and I can access his chakra." Naruto didn't dare to look to see the expressions on Sakura's and Sasuke's faces. "That's why all the villagers glare at me, and also why everybody hates me. Now that you know, you guys probably will too…"

Sakura was a little surprised at first, but then everything began to piece together. Parents telling their kids to stay away from Naruto, the harsh whispers about him being "that boy", the waitress earlier… How Naruto would always sit by himself on that same old swing as a kid, nobody ever approaching him, and even how her own parents told her to avoid him… Everything made sense now.

From time to time, she had got a feeling that Naruto had two different chakra or something, and back in the Forest of Death he'd shown incredible power that she'd never seen in anybody before, both against Orochimaru and even later against Neji in the Final Rounds…

"Heh he... The brat of Kyuubi is still alive and kicking! How fascinating that when he is consumed with rage, he loses himself... and a bit of the nine-tailed fox trapped within... comes through, An amazing developement! There's the proof. The spell that seals the monster within appears on your skin like a tattoo."

Orochimaru's voice suddenly echoed in her head. She'd been too panicked at the time to think much of what he was saying, but she finally recalled it and realized the meaning of what he'd said.

...And that...

That must have been why Naruto wanted to become Hokage, why he was always so determined to prove everybody around him wrong… Always pulling pranks in the academy to get people to notice him... Making such big scenes… And also indirectly why all the kids had treated Naruto so badly and shunned him…

Immeasurable guilt and empathy weighed on her chest, tears forming in her eyes. At the time, back in the academy days, even up to sometime after, she'd been no different than the others and just blindly went along with the crowd… She'd labeled Naruto as nothing but a pest who was always getting in her way, refusing to acknowledge his existence as anything beyond that, often even comparing him to Sasuke... But never once even questioning why he acted that way nor considering his feelings…

Even back when she spoke of Naruto's less-than-desirable behavior being due to his lack of parenting and Sasuke pointed out that Naruto was lonely beneath it all, although she'd vowed to be nicer to him, it hadn't completely dawned on her yet just how wrong she'd been about him. But in recent months, she'd seen and heard about him picking himself back up over and over again and fighting against impossible odds. It never ceased to amaze her.

He'd complimented her, cheered her on, was more determined than anybody else she knew, spoke his mind without hesitation to defend people who couldn't defend themselves, and she'd slowly but surely realized that he was anything BUT the person she originally thought he was. Most importantly, he wasn't some...demon, like the villagers treated him as. Even if the nine tails did reside in him, that didn't define him.

He was Naruto Uzumaki, the boy that the golden heart who had deeply inspired and changed so many people, herself included.

The bandages on the blonde's arm suddenly caught her sight again and this time… Her perception of the whole situation was completely different.

Reaching up, she acted without thinking.

Naruto tensed up, as if he was expecting to be hit, but froze when she hugged him yet again that night.

"I'm sorry, Naruto…" Sakura choked out. "I had no idea. You must have been though a lot, huh...? You should have told me sooner, idiot… I would have beat those villagers to a pulp..."

Naruto was at a loss of words for a long time… Slowly, he found himself reach up to return the embrace, basking in her warmth and unable to stop the tears from welling up in his eyes.

"Hey..." He smiled weakly. "I wouldn't want you to become a murderer on my account, Sakura-chan."

Sakura didn't say anything, but continued clinging to him for reasons that she didn't even understand herself.

Sasuke was under a similar thought process. He'd always noticed how Naruto was alone and isolated from others, how all the adults tried to avoid him and had their kids do the same. And he knew there was a reason for it, but neither Fugaku nor Mikoto ever told him a straight answer, just that it was best if he avoided him.

Yet, now that he knew why, on top of it explaining the treatment from the villagers directed at Naruto, he could also finally put some answers to questions, like Naruto's rapid growth in the past few months, and the strange power he'd seemed to inhibit…

"I see… So that must be why Itachi was after you…" He murmured in realization, his eyes down cast. Sakura looked over at him a bit confused by what they were referring to.

"Well, yes," Kakashi said before Naruto could, "your brother is a member of an organization known as the Akatsuki. We still don't know what their motive is, but we do know they want to capture Naruto. And if the Kyuubi's power fell into the wrong hands, it could be used as a tool for massive destruction. We have to prevent that at all costs."

Sasuke was silent for a brief moment as he thought of it, before giving a darkened look and clenching his fist. "Don't worry, we *will*. I've already lost all of my loved ones once before due to that bastard, I'm not about to allow Naruto to get wrapped up any further in this twisted plot of his than he already is. Naruto isn't just some pawn to be used and thrown away as that *he* sees fit."

"That's right! If they want Naruto, then they'll have to get through us...! Shannaro!" Sakura made her determination known, lightly hugging Naruto's neck from the side and pumping a fist. She hadn't heard of the Akatsuki before now, but she got the gist of what was going on and she was *fired up*.

As he watched them, Kakashi briefly was somehow reminded of Kushina and Minato, but quickly pushed that though out of his mind for the time being.

Naruto himself was clearly a bit surprised by their open-mindedness to his situation, but gave a weak smile, knowing Sasuke was trying in his own way to say that he didn't judge him.

He had always feared the day they found out. He had went over tons of different reactions in his head before, not a single one good coming into his realm of possibilities. But maybe it wasn't so bad after all, he realized, with a spark of hope.

He was silent for a moment before wiping the remnants of tears from his eyes. After a short while he finally spoke, looking down cast and slightly grinning. "...Thanks, guys… That really means a lot to me.…"

Kakashi was glad to see his students finally getting along with each other again. He knew that their ambition to protect Naruto from the Akatsuki might not be so easily realized, but he told himself that that was a conversation for another day. Right now, Naruto just needed rest.

"No need to thank us, idiot." Sakura bumped his shoulder with her elbow. "We're you're teammates."

"Sorry, I guess I keep forgetting." Naruto laughed nervously. (He hadn't actually forgotten, the night had just been incredibly awkward for him).

"See, I told you there was nothing to worry about." Kakashi placed a hand on Naruto's shoulder.

"Yeah, you were right, Kakashi-sensei. And honestly, I don't think I would have been able to bring myself to face them if it weren't for you encouraging me, so thanks a lot…"

"...Don't mention it..." Kakashi said looking at him fondly, before turning his gaze to his other two students. Alright you three... I think it's about time we all get some rest. And Naruto, I'm going to have to take your weapons with me for the night. I'm sure you understand why, right...?"

Naruto averted his gaze but, knowing he was in no place to be making demands, muttered a low, "Yeah, I guess…"

"Good. Now that we're all clear. Tomorrow, presuming that Naruto is doing a little better, we should hopefully be able to get back to the mission. So try to get as much rest as you all can."

A short while later, Kakashi left the room, after having double checked Naruto for hidden weapons that he could use to hurt himself with, and took them with him.

Sakura was the next one to leave after telling both of them good night. It did briefly concern her when she saw the bag of rice balls still sitting beside the bed, since Sasuke hadn't eaten anything all day, and part of her wanted to stay with Naruto out of concern for him as well, but she decided it was best to give the two boys space and did as such.

Now, it was just Sasuke and Naruto, and the silence between them was as heavy as ever.

Naruto wasn't really surprised, but it did feel uncomfortable none the less, especially since all his cards were out on the table. Sure, he was grateful that Sasuke hadn't judged him, but yet, that's why this was even scarier in some sense because now he didn't know *what* to expect from Sasuke.

"Hey, Naruto…" The raven haired boy suddenly spoke up, startling him.

"Y-yeah? What is it?" Naruto inquired, jumping a bit.

"...Sorry about earlier. I didn't really know how else to react…" Sasuke's back was facing Naruto and he was clearly just as awkward as Naruto was about everything.

"Hey, don't worry about it…" Naruto reassured Sasuke, shocking even himself, before smiling softly as he gazed down at the bandages on his arm. "I mean… I guess I probably would have done the same thing if I had been in your situation too… So I can't exactly blame you, ya know?"

"You're not mad...? Che, that's a little surprising." Sasuke smirked, raising an eyebrow.

"I was earlier, no doubt, but then I got to thinking about it, and as much as I hate to admit it, you were right, Sasuke… The route I've been going down isn't healthy… And I made Sakura-chan cry earlier… She doesn't deserve that… I can't really say I want to stop, but… If it'll make you guys happy, I thought I could at least try… I mean… it's worth a shot, right...?" Naruto finished off weakly.

Sasuke thought about his words. Down deep, he was relieved to hear Naruto say such things, but his pride wouldn't let him show it.

So instead he simply scoffed in a light-hearted manner. "You talk too much."

"Hey, it's what I do best." Naruto joked a bit.

"Just get some sleep, Usuratonkachi..." Sasuke chastised.

"Yeah, yeah, I know..." Naruto muttered, laying down.

At this point, Sasuke was left alone with his own thoughts, as he thought over the day's events. From the revelation about Naruto's self-harm to learning about where his strange power had come from to even figuring out part of Itachi's goals.

He had a lot of conflicting thoughts but the most prominent thought process surprised even him.

Several images popped into his head, one of a young blonde boy sitting on a swing by himself with nobody to talk to, and nobody wanting to approach him, random trivial arguments he'd had with him, and even seemingly irrelevant stuff like that unison sign they did back in the academy.

It wasn't even all the big things he was thinking about it, it was the small things, like how he and Naruto used to always fight in the academy, how Naruto always kept trying no matter how much he lost against him, stuffing their faces with food and competing to see who could get to the top of the tree first during the mission in Nami no Kuni.

How had a been so blind…? Naruto should be priority right now. Sure he'd probably never be able to just accept what happened to his family. And Itachi would always remain as his number one enemy, but…

He found himself unable to keep from glancing at the bandages on his teammate's arm.

Naruto was his friend..., and Team 7… It was more than just some acquaintanceship… It was like a *family*. He couldn't lose that… *Not again.*

And briefly, the thought arose in his mind. Maybe he should have tried to understand Naruto sooner… Maybe, it wouldn't have come to this.

Back in the academy, if he'd put his pride aside and tried to approach him just once, maybe something could have been different… Maybe… They could have been closer, and Naruto

wouldn't have been so alone. And just *maybe* he wouldn't be harming himself right now…

That's when he scoffed. What was he doing right now…? He almost sounded like Naruto with this friendship drabble.

Yet, it didn't stop him from considering how different things could have been right now, if he'd taken the initiative to be there for him sooner.

Well, that was in the past, no use in regrets now. All that was left at this point was to move forward and be there for him when he needed it most...

He wasn't about to let even Itachi pull him away from that.

Yet he knew all too well…

In his current state, he would be nothing against Itachi or even his partner. He was still too weak.

And in the back of his head, there was a voice that told him the same thing he'd told himself so many times before, but this time, both Kakashi's and Tsunade's advice to him fresh in mind, it had an almost entirely different weight behind it:

I have to get stronger...

...

A/N: I hate how this chapter turned out but I tried my best. Before you say Sakura was too quick to accept, just remember her reaction when Naruto himself told her that he had the nine tails inside of him. She didn't judge him, she didn't think of him any differently. She just pieced together why he was shunned the way he did as a kid. And when Naruto went into Nine Tails state, Sakura ran straight towards him without thinking twice. She even lied about the injury he caused her in that state because she didn't want him to feel bad. So yeah… In any case, I love love love NaruSaku, so I hope y'all are enjoying this. And the parental Kakashi stuff, why has been kind of hard to write but rewarding none the less.

PS: Since this is NaruSaku endgame, I'm also kind of debating what to do about Hinata, since she has feelings for Naruto. I've been considering KibaxHinata since I've always thought the pairing was super cute, but I want to know if you all are okay with that. There won't be a lot of focus on it, but it will have to probably come up at some point, so I'm curious what you all think.

Chapter 10

Story: Melancholy, Chapter 10

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

Note: Hi guys, I'm sorry it's been so long, my grandmother had Corona Virus, as well as some of my other relatives, and we've been moving rooms around the house, so I've been very distracted and haven't had the chance to do much writing at all, was lacking motivation. To be honest, I'm still kind of depressed right now, but I will answer everybody's questions in a author's note in the next chapter, I promise.

Sorry there's not a lot in this chapter, and it feels kind of lack luster, but it's something, so please don't hate me!

That night, Naruto had one of the worst dreams he'd had in a while. Except he didn't register it as a dream at first, because felt all too real. It was what he was used to, after all. Walking through the crowds of villagers, and noticing the looks of fear and hatred, the harsh whispers, etc.

He forced himself to walk past them, and the next thing he knew, he was at the bridge his team met up at often before missions. Right as he was about to raise his hand to say hello and approach Sasuke and Sakura, Sakura's voice entered his awareness and his heart immediately dropped in his chest.

"How did Naruto even get to become a ninja in the first place?" She asked with a ruthless snarkiness, void of any kind emotions. They didn't even seem to notice him and he couldn't move from his spot after that. "What was the Sandaime even thinking allowing a monster like him into the ranks? He's a liability."

"You're right. If we're not careful, he could hurt one of us too. We should probably keep an eye on him." Sasuke pointed out.

Naruto could feel his chest constrict, and without thinking, he spoke, trying his best to ignore the stinging sensation in his eyes:

"So, even now, everybody's still afraid of me…It's not really like I'm that surprised, I guess…, but I didn't choose this, ya know! I didn't choose to have that thing put inside of me!"

It was at this moment that he woke up. Wiping the tears from his eyes and sniffling, he realized he'd been crying in his sleep.

He knew it was a dream, but honestly, it didn't feel that way at all. Because, even if it *was* only that, hearing Sakura's and Sasuke's words struck him like a knife straight through the chest.

And it made him realize, they'd got over and accepted the truth of his past so fast. Were they pretending to not be bothered while hiding the fact that they were actually disgusted? For that matter, Kakashi too, and Iruka, they'd all been so accepting, all things considered, and he suddenly couldn't help but wonder why... Any normal human being *would* be disgusted, so why...?

He got up, deciding it was better not to think about it. It was just a dream after all, right?

Even so, it didn't exactly ease his mind all that well. In the past, Sakura and Sasuke had said stuff about him that, as much as he hated to admit it, really hurt.

"No. I can't let this stuff get to me...!" He scolded himself. *"We're on a mission right now. I've already caused enough trouble for them as it is."*

With that notion in mind, he decided to get up, and head to the lobby.

He sat outside on the front steps, taking in the early morning chill. The sun had barely rose, lightly illuminating the sky in a vibrant array of red, orange, purple and blue. He sat down on the front step to the building, taking in the peaceful morning chill and silence.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long until negative thoughts started setting in again. And much to his relief which he wouldn't admit to feeling, Sasuke's voice knocked him out of his thoughts.

"You're up pretty early." The raven noted casually.

Naruto briefly jumped a bit startled.

"I should say the same to you.." Naruto said, quickly regaining his composure as if nothing was wrong.

"To be honest, I actually couldn't sleep…" Sasuke muttered, before he sat down next to Naruto.

For the longest time, they were silent, nobody said anything. Naruto felt like he was suffocating from the quiet, but couldn't put his pride aside to just speak.

Needless to say, he was shocked when Sasuke took the initiative for him.

"So um... how are you feeling?" Sasuke blushed a bit, but otherwise was surprised at how casually he asked the question over all and Naruto was surprised by the question in general.

"...'m fine, I guess..." Was all he could muster, never having felt this awkward before around Sasuke.

"Really? You seem pretty tense to me." Sasuke pointed out, smirking a bit.

"Yeah, well how would *you* feel in my situation?" Naruto retorted, snorting.

"Fair enough…" Sasuke looked away.

Yet another silence settled in between them and neither boy knew what to say. This would be so much easier if it was Sakura, Naruto swore. Most of the time, he and Sasuke were at each other's throats due to their rivalry, so speaking on equal grounds wasn't exactly something they were used to and they were feeling awkward as hell.

"...Hey, Naruto... "

"Hm?" Naruto inquired, when he heard Sasuke say his name.

"If you don't mind me asking... " Sasuke momentarily trailed off into silence before continuing, unable to look at him. "What all… have the villagers done to you...?"

Naruto was taken aback by the question and Sasuke didn't expect Naruto to answer, but was surprised when he chose to speak up.

"...Well, mostly it's just glaring at me and talking about me behind my back, I guess…" Naruto said in a low voice. "Although… There was some other stuff, but…"

"Like what?" Sasuke inquired casually.

"I… It's nothing important." Naruto had seemed to consider opening up, but in the end, quickly chose against it for whatever reason - he almost seemed scared of something.

Even thought part of Sasuke wanted to know what Naruto had been about to say, he had never been the type to pressure somebody into talking about something they didn't want to talk about, so he decided to drop the subject at that.

And even if he had tried to push it, it was too late, because Naruto got up, stretching. "Anyway, I'm gonna go and get something to eat from the cafeteria. You should come too."

"I'll pass. I'm not really hungry right now."

Naruto scoffed a bit, raising an eyebrow. Come to think of it, Sasuke hadn't ate anything yesterday either, or at least not that he could think of. "Really? You sure don't want anything?"

"Yeah…" Sasuke muttered. "Just go on ahead already."

"Well, alright. If you say so." Naruto decided to shrug it off. *It's probably nothing*...

...

"Good morning, Naruto." Naruto, who was eating some buttered toast, looked up to see Sakura standing there with some food on a tray.

"Oh, mornin', Sakura-chan." He looked up, a bit surprised when she sat down next to him. Normally, she would have wanted to eat meals with Sasuke or something(yesterday being the exception), but who was he to complain? This was *the girl he liked* , after all!

"So how are you feeling?" She asked, seeming a bit shy, as she cut up some sausages and mixed them in with the scrambled eggs. It was the same question Sasuke had asked him, but this time he responded with ease.

"Yeah, I'm feeling much better now thanks to you guys!" Naruto grinned. In truth, he *was* feeling a *little* better than last night, at least physically, since he'd got some rest. Although... he was still feeling kind of crummy, but he didn't want to worry Sakura. Besides, that dream… He'd tried not to let it bother him, but now that she was sitting next to him, he still couldn't help but hear her words echo in his head, something inside of him keeping him from wanting to trust her.

"Well, that's good. You've had me worried sick." Sakura sighed exasperated. Naruto felt a pang of guilt at hearing her say that but before he could say anything, she continued, giving a

serious look. "Naruto… You'll come to one of us in the future if you need to talk or something, won't you?"

Naruto looked away, feeling worse than ever because promises were his weakness. His entire motto was to not go back on his word. How to get out of this...?

Naruto forced a smile, not wanting to let her hopes down. "'Hey, don't worry, Sakura-chan. If there's something I want to talk about, you'd be one of the first ones I go to."

It was perhaps stretching things a bit, but it wasn't an outright lie. After all, talking about his feelings wasn't something he particularly DID want to do, but if he felt the desire to talk about something in the future with her, he at least knew that she would already know his secret and it would be easier to talk to her about it. Somehow, that *was* a little comforting at the very least.

Even so, he couldn't deny that he was hesitant. This whole outsourcing thing was new to him, and he couldn't exactly say he liked it very much. Both Sasuke and Sakura expressing so much concern for him... It made him feel uncomfortable and kind of guilty. More importantly, something about about it felt wrong, almost like he didn't deserve it.

Sakura, noticed the way he averted his gaze, but right as she was about to speak her doubts, she was interrupted by another voice.

"Mornin, guys…" They looked up to see Izumi standing there, next to Saburo.

"Oh, Izumi-san! Saburo-san! I'm so sorry, I didn't see you two there." Sakura apologized vehemently.

"Don't sweat it, Haruno-san. It's really no problem." Izumi said raising a hand casually, smiling lightly. "Do you mind if we sit here?"

"Oh, no, of course not, please go right ahead…!" Sakura assured him, not wanting to be rude, but sounding somehow nervous as a result.

Back when she was a young child, she had suffered from extreme social anxiety, something Ino had helped her get through and overcome, inspired confidence in her, but once in a while, it resurfaced through bouts of nervousness when talking to people she didn't know all that well.

"Thanks." Izumi said, casually, as he took a step beside them.

As Sakura continued talking with Izumi, Naruto suddenly felt like he was being pushed away somehow, simply because he didn't know what to say.

He was a little disappointed that Izumi and Saburo had taken over the conversation and his time with Sakura but he decided to let them be.

...

"I figured you might be out here, Sasuke... Aren't you going to join the others for breakfast?" Kakashi's voice snapped Sasuke out of his thoughts, startling him a bit. Kakashi had passed by the cafeteria to notice Sasuke was missing. He doubted his words would have any effect, considering that this was Sasuke and he *could* be pretty stubborn, but it wouldn't hurt to encourage him to participate once in a while.

"I'll pass... " Sasuke, as expected, said curtly, making it clear he wasn't interested and nor was he in the mood. Kakashi sighed.

"Are you sure?" Kakashi asked. "I heard they have skip-jack tuna."

"...Yeah." Sasuke muttered after a moment of apparent hesitation. "I'm not hungry."

At that, Kakashi sighed, deciding it was better not to push it any further. However, he had at least known Sasuke long enough to notice something off. He looked more tense than usual. His voice had seemed more dismissive than usual as well. Something was bothering him and it was no surprise with everything that had been happening as of late and especially yesterday.

"...Is there... something on your mind? I don't mind talking." He asked.

Ever so briefly, Sasuke considered opening up. He considered talking about the guilt he was feeling for not having tried to be there for Naruto sooner, the nightmares he'd been having over his brother, the fact that he hadn't felt like eating much of anything lately and that he hadn't been getting that great of sleep. Ever so briefly, Sasuke almost wanted to let it all out. But right as soon as the temptation came, his instinct to shut people out got the best of him and overrode his desire to talk.

"No, it's nothing." He said curtly.

Kakashi, of course, didn't buy it for an instance. "You know, Sasuke… Even I don't need Sharingan to see through that one... What's *really* bothering you...?"

His voice wasn't condescending, only honest, with a hint of what almost seemed to be underlying empathy.

In truth, Sasuke reminded him of himself when he was his age. Back in those days, he was stubborn to a fault, never let anybody in, and was filled with bitterness and distrust at the world.

"I said it's nothing. Just drop it." Sasuke glared away. He clearly didn't want to talk about it.

Kakashi sighed again and Sasuke seemed a tad surprised when he felt a hand on his head. "I won't force you to talk or anything, but… You don't always have to keep everything to yourself, Sasuke… As you saw yesterday, that only got Naruto so far..."

And for that matter, Kakashi honestly could help but wonder exactly what Sasuke's mind state was at now.

"I'm not like Naruto…" Sasuke made his stance clear, as if to deny that anything was wrong.

"Hmm…, that *is* true, I suppose… In fact, you're the kind of person who will brood on his feelings alone even *longer and harder* than Naruto." Kakashi absentmindedly admitted, before he kneeled down in front of his student. "Well, just remember this; If you decide you need somebody to talk to, I'll be here to listen, deal?"

Kakashi could only hope his words got through to the raven haired boy, that, just like Naruto, he too had people who cared about him.

Sasuke seemed surprised as if he was almost considering it, but quickly huffed and looked always, feeling his face heat up at the awkwardness. "Whatever…"

…

A/N: Again, sorry it's not a lot, but it's the least I can give y'all after being patient for so long...

Chapter 11

Story: Melancholia Chapter 11

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

A/N: Sorry it's been so long AGAIN! I've actually been moving to a different house so I haven't had time for writing much of anything. (For once

...

By the end of the morning, Kakashi, after discussing the matter with Naruto, who assured him he was completely fine, decided it was probably best to head out again. He reluctantly gave him back his weapon holster, but not before giving him one single plea:

"Naruto, listen to me… You have to promise me that while we're out here, if you feel the need to hurt yourself again, you'll come to me *first, okay?"*

Naruto, who had the self-proclaimed motto to never go back on his word, naturally didn't want to make such a promise, because, honestly, he didn't think he would be able to keep it. Talking about his feelings had never been in his strong suit, sure, but that was easy in comparison to actually stepping out of his comfort zone and *coming* to somebody else for help. And Naruto made that clear, when he said he would *try*.

Kakashi didn't like it, but he decided it was better than nothing, and he would just have to accept it until they got back to the village.

…

"Um… Saburo-san….?" Sakura hoped she wasn't intruding. But when Saburo looked up at her, she figured maybe it was okay to continue. "I don't think you've said anything to us the whole time we've been here. Is there something you're afraid of...?"

Saburo looked away and Izumi took the initiative to speak up for him.

"Saburo doesn't talk…" he said. "He *can't*... not after the incident."

"What incident...?" Sasuke, who was standing next to Sakura, inquired, his interest peaked. He knew it probably wasn't something he should ask, but curiosity got the best of him.

Izumi was hesitant for a moment, but decided to answer his question.

"The port we're headed to… It's not actually our original home..." He explained, a downcast look in his eyes. "We're actually from a village far away from here. I doubt you've heard of it, but it was a mining town down near the border of Iwagakure, called Sankohaba… We sold coal and numerous other minerals. Some thugs got wind of it and came and ransacked the village one night. All of our buildings were set on fire, and our parents and numerous others

were killed, we were two of the only survivors. After that, Saburo stopped speaking and me…? I never wanna go back there again… I'm sure you understand…"

Sasuke looked away. He did understand, all to well, what it was like to lose everything in a single night.

"Don't you want revenge, for what happened...?" He murmured.

"*No*…" Izumi shook his head, surprising the others, especially Sasuke. "Well, don't get me wrong. I don't really think I would let the bastards who did it get off scott free if I came into contact with them, in fact I probably *would* try to kill them... but... I guess didn't want to continue living in the past, which was exactly why we left. If we'd stayed, the hatred and the bitterness… it would have consumed us… If I lived for revenge, I wouldn't be able to live out my life to its fullest. Sometimes, you just have to let go and move on, despite how hard it may be. And I mean… And we have each other still, so it's better than nothing..."

"I see…" Sasuke thought about it.

Without thinking, Sakura reached out and grabbed his hand in a comforting manner, recognizing the look on his face. She knew about his clan, about his desire for revenge against his brother. How Itachi had killed his entire family and left Sasuke alone as a child.

More than anything, She just wanted him to know that he didn't have to face it by himself, that he had people who cared about him.

"You and I both have found precious friends, haven't we?"

Kakashi's past words echoed in his head, making him ponder it.

As much as he hated to admit it, he was right…

He still had Sakura and Naruto, and Kakashi too. It wasn't like he was entirely alone. Yet the idea of letting go of any of his pent up rage also scared him, *terrified* him, his brother's voice calling him a coward and weak as always.

He felt nauseated, but he didn't pull his hand away, downdeep feeling comfort in Sakura's touch.

From behind them, Kakashi watched them, smiling a bit.

...

For the next five hours, not much else was said, and their travels went fairly smoothly, although Naruto was becoming noticeably more and more anxious and antsy, before he finally burst out yelling.

"Dammit, I can't take this anymore…! How much longer until we get to the next town? I'm getting sick and tired of all this walking!" He growled. He never had been the patient type.

"We have *been on the road for quite a while…"* Sasuke somehow found himself agreeing, but didn't voice it.

"Naruto's right for once… I'm so tired*..."* Sakura thought, exasperated. Maybe it was the heat.

Then again, she hadn't really had the best night of sleep last night.

"Try to calm down, Naruto." Kakashi patted him. "It's probably going to be another hour yet before we reach the next town, but you shouldn't worry so much. We'll be there before you know it."

"He's right, Naruto." Sakura smiled. "We've already been walking for over five hours, one more should be nothing for us."

"R-Right! Yeah! We can *totally* take this, ya know!" Naruto grinned, pumping his fist, but deep down he was still uncertain in his own voice. Didn't like Kakashi's response at all. He was nervous, fidgety, and worst of all his arms were itching, anxiety creeping up as strong as ever.

Why the hell did enemies choose *now* not to attack? Just one lousy villain, that's all he asked for. Somebody he could fight with and let off some steam on. But luck would never be on his side about this. Briefly, he considered picking a fight with Sasuke for the hell of it, but quickly decided against it. Sakura and Kakashi wouldn't be happy with him at all for such a thing, and as much as he hated to admit it, he'd probably lose fairly quickly anyway, considering how weak he was feeling.

That's when the idea suddenly popped in his head.

Maybe he could convince Kakashi to let him walk off in the ruse of pissing. Just a couple cuts were all he needed. Just a little bit of blood to get him through the rest of the day.

Nobody would notice a thing!

"But first... Kakashi-sensei…? I um... kind of need to take a leak." He said sheepishly, looking away.

"Hm… Alright, Naruto, but make it fast. We don't have all day." Kakashi said simply.

Naruto was quite frankly surprised, but hey, this worked out perfectly, and he couldn't be more grateful.

"Of course! Be right back!" Naruto said running off into the woods a ways, where he was no longer in their sight. He made haste to pull out his fix and lifted up the bandage wrap to where the other cuts were already healing. He created several lacerations, feeling satisfaction when blood came pouring out of them, dripping onto the ground. A familiar sense of euphoria hit him at the sight of the crimson liquid, and, feeling the sting, he was finally able to calm the nervousness in his chest. After a minute, however, he told himself he needed to hurry and forced himself to put the bandage wrap back in place and returned the kunai to its holster.

For a brief moment, he felt guilty, remembering how he had said he would try to come to Kakashi if he felt like hurting himself again, but they were on a mission right now and the others were there. He didn't want to be of any more trouble than he already had. And it was too late now.

Moments later, he returned to where the others were waiting for him, feeling more relaxed now than he had before leaving their sides.

"I'm back. That took a little bit longer than expected, but I really needed to let it out, ya know?" Naruto grinned. Normally, saying such a thing would have disgusted Sakura.

But judging by the look on her face, he didn't think she believed him. Kakashi or Sasuke either for that matter. Sasuke himself was obviously suspicious, but seeing as Saburo and Izumi were there, they chose not to mention anything.

Kakashi said. "Naruto..., can I talk to you alone...?"

"Hm? Sure, what's up?" Naruto asked, playing innocent, yet inside terrified because he realized Kakashi had probably caught on.

"You guys go on ahead. We'll catch up." Kakashi said, looking back at the others.

"A-Alright." Sakura said uncertainly. She and Sasuke looked like they wanted to protest, but left it up to Kakashi to take care of the matter.

After a bit, Naruto and Kakashi was left far behind and Kakashi finally looked at him.

"I can smell blood. Will you show me your arm…?" He immediately dredged the conversation, already having caught on.

"I…!" Naruto looked away guiltily. He tried to back away, but Kakashi was too quick and pulled his sleeve and bandage wrap back to see the fresh wounds

"W-Wait, Kakashi-sensei, this isn't what you think! Some of my wounds happened to reopen earlier, cuz I fell!" Naruto sputtered nervously, due to having been found out. Kakashi could easily tell it was a cover up.

"Don't *lie* to me. You swore that you would try to come to me if you felt the need to cut again, Naruto. We could have talked about it." Kakashi said in a saddened tone. "I wanted to believe I could *trust* you."

"I…! I'm really sorry… I just… I can't *stand* it. I always feel like anxiety is driving me crazy and I don't even know why anymore…!" Naruto choked out. "I didn't mean to make you mad, I just-"

"Naruto, calm down…" Kakashi cut him off, holding his fidgeting hands and kneeling down in front of him. "I'm not *mad* at you…"

Naruto looked up him, uncertainly, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears which tore Kakashi's heart to pieces. "But seeing you hurt yourself like this… It… really *worries* me.

You're my *student*, I only want to *help* you. So can you please… just trust me for once?"

Naruto was silent for a moment, but nodded. "I can't make any promises, but I'll *try*, for *real* this time, ya know?"

"That's all I can ask..." Kakashi said giving his hands a small squeeze.

Without thinking, he suddenly hugged Kakashi around the neck, surprising the older man. "Thanks, Kakashi-sensei. I actually feel a little better now."

After a moment, Kakashi's expression softened and he decided Naruto needed this, returning the embrace, akin to a father embracing his child. Briefly, he brushed Naruto on the head.

"Don't mention it."

…

At long last, they finally reached the next town, which some kind of festival was apparently going on at and Kakashi decided that it would be best to stop for the evening, and once again, checked them into a hotel, which offered extensive dinner options.

Everybody had sat down at one of the tables with a plate of food except for Sakura. Even Sasuke had caved in enough to eat a riceball. It wasn't a lot, but Kakashi figured it was better than nothing.

"Hey, Sakura-chan, aren't you going to eat something?" Naruto asked her.

"Huh?" Sakura looked up before nervously brushing his concerns aside and ignoring her stomach. "Nah, I'm actually not really all that hungry. Besides, I'm *supposed* to be on a diet right now."

She'd already been stuffing her face with enough fattening foods as it was, ever since she left the village. Naruto was right, about how much she loved sweets. It kind of irked her. She never had this kind of problem at home, balancing her meals and dieting was always so easy, especially with her mother constantly reminding her of the importance of not eating too much less she put on weight, but when she was away on missions, the temptation to eat the most high-calorie foods there were always ended up consuming her and it caused her to pack on pounds. Honestly, she needed to exercise restraint, she told herself.

She'd told herself that same thing *over and over again* in fact yet something *always happened and ruined it!*

"Aren't you a little too young to be worrying about diets, Sakura?" Kakashi asked casually, raising an eyebrow. At some point he'd already finished his food, without them even seeing him do so.

"What? No way." Sakura shrugged. "You can *never* be too young to diet! Besides, it's only *normal* for a girl my age to want to stay in shape or else I'll just get fat. Heck, I already need to lose enough weight as it is."

Now this took everybody aback. Sakura…thought she was...?

"What d'ya mean, Sakura-chan? You're not fat." Naruto said after a moment of hesitance, not liking to hear her say such things about herself. Not that he ever judged heavier set people or thought badly of them. But what Sakura said just wasn't true.

"Just stop it, Naruto, there's really no need to be nice for my sake." Sakura scolded him.

"But I'm not!" Naruto insisted. "I mean it! You're the prettiest girl I *know*...!"

To be honest, Naruto hadn't intended to let that last part out, his mouth had just acted on its own, but it certainly wasn't a *lie* so he had no desire to take it back. Seriously, how could she not see in *herself* what *he* saw in her?

Sakura was surprised by his words, feeling her heart suddenly flutter by his compliment, but before she could respond, Sasuke added his own comment.

"Naruto's right…" he murmured, stopping her from retorting, as he looked away with a small blush of awkwardness. "You're perfectly normal..."

"Yeah! Yeah! What he said." Naruto grinned. "There's nothing wrong with you at all!"

"...You really… think so?" Sakura said with uncertainty as she looked down. It was no secret that she'd always had insecurities about her body.

"Of course!" Naruto assured her that he was being completely honest about his thoughts.

"I… Thanks, Naruto… You too, Sasuke-kun…" Sakura said in a low voice, flustered.

It didn't make her feel that much better, but she decided not to press it any further.

"Hey, don't mention it!" Naruto said.

"Yeah, it's no problem… You worry too much..." Sasuke reached over without really thinking about it, and softly flicked the side of her head. After a moment, he calmly got up. "I'm going to bed. Call me if you need anything."

"Um… I should probably go to bed too." Sakura said nervously after a moment, excusing herself as she got up.

Kakashi spoke up before she could leave, holding out an apple. "Sakura, I know you said you're not hungry, but maybe you should take an apple or something, just in case you change your mind."

"R-right." She said with a small smile, taking the fruit from him, before heading to her room.

When she entered the room, anxiety started to find its way to the pit of her stomach and she had half a mind to throw away the bright red apple. Instead, however, she chose to place it on the dresser, before turning to sit on her bed.

For some reason, she suddenly couldn't help but think about Mibuki, was probably fuming when she realized she was gone. Remembering how how mother had slapped her yesterday, and even the harsh manner in which she had grabbed her arm, the idea of going back home actually sort of scared her. Something in her wondered if she would do something far worse the next time she saw her. Mibuki had always had an issue with screaming at her, fussing at her over the littlest of things but that was the first time she'd really ever got physically aggressive. Needless to say, a part of her had been terrified.

Well, at least she *had* parents, she told herself. Naruto and Sasuke didn't even have *that* much. This was *nothing*.

Remembering Naruto and Sasuke, she recalled back over the course of the day's events. She was certain that Naruto had cut himself again, judging by Kakashi's behavior earlier.

Sasuke still seemed to be holding some things back, but at least he had finally eaten *something*.

Then again, despite her concern for him about it, Sakura knew down deep she wasn't a person to judge somebody for eating habits. After all, she sometimes even forced herself to throw up her meals to keep her weight in check, for a sense of control when felt like she ate too much.

It wasn't something she would ever tell any of the others about, of course, she knew they wouldn't approve of it.

But even so, it gave her a sense of control over at least one part of her life when everything else was falling to pieces around her. Just like last night and this morning. Unknown to anybody else, she had binged more than she should have eaten and then purged. It was really nothing *new*. At least not for her.

She merely had a specific diet she followed. A specific routine.

If she screwed it up, then she made it right. That was all there was to it.

"I feel worse than ever right now and my head is pounding. I wonder if I'll actually be able to get some sleep tonight? I hope so. If not, it's not like it wouldn't be a surprise."

She lied down, trying to force herself to drift off, all to no avail.

Her worries consumed her.

…

When Naruto came into his shared room with Sasuke, Sasuke appeared to be asleep on his bed. Naruto decided not to disturb him, and slowly walked past him. Afterwards, he decidedly got a change of clothes and entered the bathroom to take a shower.

He looked down at his marred arms, feeling guilty. Suddenly, he remembered Kakashi earlier and his plea to come to him for help next time he felt like it and briefly he considered it. Briefly, an urge hit him telling him he should. Because over the past couple of days, the craving had been hitting him like every few hours, it was driving him mad!

His arm itched and all he wanted to do was scratch, to cut. He knew this wasn't healthy. For so long, he had kept trying to tell himself he was fine, that he had it under control, but yet down deep he knew it wasn't.

And despite that, he couldn't bring himself to go to Kakashi. He had to be stronger than that. Maybe for once he could just hold himself back.

And for a while, he *did*.

In fact, for the entire next two, nearly three, days, he was able to fight against the urge and the budding anxiety that he felt. For at least two whole days, he was able to able to tell himself no.

He had never felt prouder.

And he was sure Kakashi would be proud too if he knew that he had forced himself to resist the urges, despite how much more persistent they were becoming.

It was that second night that Izumi and Saburo finally reached their destination, being the Port Town. Since it was dark and near about midnight, the two brothers offered their place to stay until daybreak. Kakashi decidedly agreed, but him and Sakura afterwards went off with Izumi to view some scenery under the moonlight, which Izumi insisted upon.

For whatever reason, Naruto had chose to go to bed, while Sasuke had stepped outside to do some target practice, mostly out of boredom, but also needing to blow off some steam. Even in the dim lighting, it was enough for him to see.

Naruto, meanwhile, took a shower and then fell asleep for a few hours.

However, all of his efforts to *stop* himself came crashing down when he once again woke up in cold sweats due to yet another nightmare. Things of which he didn't even want to thing about.

He hated it. He *hated* it. The glares. The harsh whispers. The insults.

It all felt so real.

Even the occasional *abuse and other things* which he had never wanted to speak of to *anybody*.

"It's all because of that thing inside of me. If it wasn't for that stupid fox, I wouldn't have to deal with any of this! Dammit!"

He could hardly breathe. He *needed to breathe*. He needed to let it out, the self-hate, the anger, the frustration. All of it, he needed to get it out. He needed to forget the pain.

Jumping to his feet, hardly aware of what he was even doing, he groped around the room, desperately searching for the sharpest object he could find.

Kakashi had his weapon pouch so that was out of the question. But then he noticed it: Sasuke had left his bag in the room with him. Maybe he had some kind of weapon in there? Sure enough, he managed to find a shuriken after spilling out some of his stuff onto the floor. It wasn't as comfortable to hold as a kunai, but honestly, he couldn't care less. At this point, anything would do, as long as it drew blood.

And he didn't even think twice before slashing it across his arm.

Over and over again.

Blood trailing down his arm and onto the floor.

The sting he wanted, that he *needed*.

His mind becoming more relaxed with each slash.

Somewhere in his subconscious, he thought he saw a shadow out of the corner of his eye in the door way, but didn't acknowledge it.

Little did he know that it was Saburo who had passed by the room and witnessed the sight of it, immediately after running outside to Sasuke in a panic.

Sasuke had fallen asleep on the ground, tired out from his training. A few strands of his hair kept blowing over his face, and the chill had been quite refreshing, which was exactly why he had found it so easy to fall asleep.

Saburo shook him awake, however, ruining his peace of mind.

"Huh? Oh, it's you. What do you want?" Slightly dazed, Sasuke looked up Saburo, who seemed really upset about something. "What are you getting so worked up about?"

Honestly, it would be so much easier if he could talk.

Saburo pointed at the house, and made a motion favoring a wrist slash. Sasuke was heavily confused for a second, but suddenly it dawned on him what he was trying to get across.

"Wait, are you talking about Naruto?" All sleep drained from him and he was on immediate alert.

Saburo frantically nodded, pointing in the direction of the room they were staying in from outside.

"...Dammit! I shouldn't have left him alone…! Shitshitshit!" Almost faster than his feet could carry him, he ran into the house and made a beeline for the room he and Naruto were staying in.

And there he saw him, shuriken in hand, bloodied arm, lacerations covering his arm, more gashes than he could count.

He then noticed his bag was spilled out on the floor and it didn't take much to realize where Naruto had got the shuriken from, and an unbearable sense of guilt hit him. It was *his* shuriken Naruto was using. He'd left it there in his bag to be picked up by anybody. How could he have been so careless?! Kakashi was going to kill him...!

"Naruto…?! Naruto, give me the Shuriken!" Sasuke demanded, quickly approaching him.

"No! Stay away from me, you bastard!" Naruto snapped at him, pulling away.

But Sasuke didn't back down, he refused to just stand there and do nothing like the last time he saw Naruto acting like this. Despite Naruto's protests, he continued to reach and wrestle with Naruto for the Shuriken for fear of him, getting Naruto's blood all over himself.

A part of him felt bad for not being able to handle this is a kinder way like Sakura was able to, but before Naruto also wasn't holding a sharp and dangerous weapon, so he felt like he didn't have a choice and he was far too shaken up to think straight about it. More than anything, he knew getting that away from Naruto was top priority or he might hit something important.

Naruto put up far too much resistance for his comfort level but at some point Sasuke won the scuffle, and finally managed to rip the shuriken out of his best friend's grip, all though he had got slashed a few times in the process.

"No, I *won't!* You have to calm down...!" He threw the deadly weapon far out of reach and quickly moved to hold Naruto back when he started to reach for it.

"Hey, I needed that…! Give it back to me, *teme*!" Naruto's voice cracked, causing Sasuke to near about fall to pieces himself.

"No, I won't allow you to keep hurting yourself…!" Sasuke held him close, tighter than ever, as he tried his best to continue holding Naruto off from getting back up to pick up the shuriken again.

"You don't understand, Sasuke…! I need this...! I need it to stop…! For it to *go away*...!"

"For *what* to go away?!" Sasuke desperately wanted to know, as Naruto scratched his face in the midst of his struggle. "Stop struggling, you idiot, and *talk* to me already! I just want to *help* you!"

Sasuke felt he probably sounded out of character, but seeing Naruto like this terrified him just as much as it had about four days prior. Nobody that was sane could exactly act 'themselves' in a situation like this.

At some point Naruto finally gave in, relaxing.

"I swear to god, Naruto, if you do that again, I'll kill you myself…" Sasuke finally muttered, finding his breathing erratic. "I can't *watch you do this to yourself*..."

"...Sorry..." Naruto mumbled. "For scaring you… You can let go now…"

"I don't trust you." Sasuke said plainly.

And Naruto couldn't blame him.

"Looks like I really screwed up big time, didn't I…?" The blonde murmured, letting his friend hug him. "For the past two days I tried my best to control the urges. I thought there was a chance I could stop, but earlier I woke up from a nightmare and just *lost it*. I don't know what's been getting into me, Sasuke. I'm swear I'm trying, just like Kakashi-sensei *asked* me to, but I completely blew his trust for the third time in a row, and now he's gonna be so mad at me god I'm such an *idiot*…!"

"Naruto, listen to me." Sasuke used the same phrase Kakashi had when he needed to get Naruto's attention. "You need to calm down and *breathe*. Think about this *rationally*. Kakashi would *never* get mad at you for something like this. The only thing that matters is that you *tried*, right?… Besides, if anybody's to blame, it's me for leaving my bag in here… I'm sorry..."

"What? No, this isn't your fault at *all*! I should have had better restraint…! I should have…! Dammit…!" Naruto hissed out, feeling more self-hate than ever.

"You shouldn't worry about it… C'mon...," Sasuke said uncertainly. "We should clean this up..."

…

A/N: Wow I hope y'all liked that. I swear I tried my best. :D

Chapter 12

Story: Melancholia Chapter 12

A/N: I FELT LIKE SUCH AN IDIOT WHEN I REALIZED I REFERRED TO FUCKING SABURO AS KOTETSU SORRY FOR THE CONFUSION IN THE LAST CHAPTER YALL I'M SUCH A DUMBASS ;W;

...

"Hold *still* , *you idiot* ! I'm trying to help here, but you're making this impossible!"

"Hey, it's not my fault it hurts, *ya know* !"

Sasuke was trying his best to clean Naruto's injuries and the dried blood, but with the blonde squirming in such a manner every time the alcohol-dampened paper towel touched his skin, he started to realize that this wasn't going to be very easy.

"I know, but you *need to calm down and stop pulling away...* ! I'm almost done. There." Sasuke said before grabbing the bandage wrap Saburo had given them before leaving the bathroom and going off to clean up the blood in the room they were staying in.

A long silence settled between them, and Sasuke began to dress his wounds.

"You said it was a nightmare that set this off…" Sasuke finally spoke back up. "What was it about…?"

“It…“ Naruto hesitated at hearing that. He should have expected as much, but it wasn't like he didn't understood. After everything that had just happened, Sasuke deserved to know the truth. “Everybody was glaring at me… All of the villagers, even *you guys*… Then it just got worse and I couldn’t stop them anymore… I know it was some stupid figment of my imagination, but it felt so *real*...”

Sasuke was silent for a moment, but quickly decided he needed to say something, so after he finished bandaging Naruto's arm, he hesitantly reached out, placing a hand on Naruto's shoulder, a tad worried when he seemed to flinch. Yet Naruto didn't stop him in the end. "Nobody's judging you... At least not anybody that matters, anyway… Just ignore them..."

"I've *tried* to... I always tell myself that it doesn't matter, but it's so hard sometimes, ya know…? I'm not even allowed to defend myself because if I fight back against them, I'll only prove them right."

"Hold on… What are you implying? Naruto… Has some of the villagers... *hurt* you before?" Sasuke asked, unable to deny the anger welling up in him. It was something Naruto had implied a few days ago as well, but he hadn't went in depth, and Sasuke had chose not to press the matter. Now, he began to question it yet again.

"No." Naruto was quick to avoid the subject, however, just like he had before. "It doesn't matter. Just forget it I said anything, okay?"

He forced himself to smile, but Sasuke could see the guilty look in his eyes. He was obviously holding things back, but Sasuke didn't have the heart to press him to talk about something he wasn't comfortable with talking about. After all, he himself had a lot of things he didn't want to talk about.

Yet despite that, he couldn't help but wonder if it was really a good idea to just drop it.

…

"It's so quiet out here…" Sakura mused as she, Kakashi, and Izumi were walking through the town.

"A little *too* quiet..." Kakashi added, as he looked around. "Even for night, there should at least be *some* activity…"

"You're right…" Izumi agreed. "Something's definitely off here. I know a few of the shops are supposed to be open all night, yet they all have their lights off…"

"It's almost like the town has been deserted..." Sakura observed. "Oh!"

"Hm?" Kakashi inquired, looking over at her.

Sakura walked over towards a lamp post, suddenly noticing what looked to be a child, a boy. He was crying.

"Hey, there, little guy... Can I ask you what your name is?" Sakura kneeled down in front of the boy. He couldn't even be eight years old. Who in their right mind would leave such a young kid outside past midnight?!

"It's Gochi…" Came the small voice amidst tears, as Kakashi and Izumi came over.

"Can you tell me where your parents are, Gochi...?" Sakura asked him in a soft voice.

"Mommy's gone… Nobody knows where she is." Katsuro choked out.

"What about your dad…?" Sakura questioned.

"He passed away two years ago…" Katsuo said, rubbing his eyes.

"Is there anybody you can stay with…?"

"No, Mommy's my only family."

At that answer, Sakura looked up at Izumi and Kakashi. "What should we do, Kakashi-sensei? We can't just leave him here."

"You do make a point…" Kakashi pondered it.

"Well, I guess he can stay with us until we can find his mother..." Izumi offered.

"His mother was probably taken by some of Juro's men. Sadly, the chances are she's gone for good." Everybody looked over, noticing a figure of what appeared to be an older boy maybe about 14 or 15 years old standing there. He had short black hair, green eyes and was wearing a beige tunic with brown pants.

"Wait, who's Juro?" Izumi asked.

"You're telling me you don't know?" the older boy rose. "He's the guy running this place now. Everybody's terrified of him."

"I haven't been here in over a year, so I'm not exactly up to date with everything that's been going on as of late." Izumi said. "Care to catch us up?"

The older boy smirked. "Sure, but it's gonna cost you."

"How much are we talking?" Izumi looked at him suspiciously.

"Not a lot, but I do have my own expenses to pay for. Prices aren't really cheap nowadays. By the way, you can call me Katsuo."

"I'm Izumi. And I'm sure you can assume that the ones behind me are ninja of Konohagakure. They escorted us here."

"I'm Sakura…" Sakura said, catching the attention of the Katsuo.

"Kakashi." Kakashi rose a hand.

"Kakashi? Kakashi *Hatake* ?" Katsuo rose an eyebrow. "As in the *Legendary Copy Ninja* Kakashi?"

"That's me." Kakashi said casually.

Katsuo was silent for a long moment, before he grinned. "Oh, wow, this is my lucky day! Or night, whichever… You have no clue how long I've wanted to meet you. I've read so many stories about you copying jutsu and taking down your enemies like it was nothing! I have admired you for so long…!"

"Oh boy." Kakashi internally sighed. "I would say I'm honored, but can you please not jump in my face?"

"Oh, sorry, I just get so worked up sometimes." Katsuo scratched his head, before glancing over at Sakura, moving closer to get a better look at her. "Oh, that reminds me... Hey, girl, you said your name was Sakura, right?"

"Um, yeah, that's right." Sakura stammered, nervously.

"Well, *Sakura,* perhaps I could give you a *proper introduction* later on, if you're *up* for it." Katsuro grabbed her hand, smirking with a slight devious edge to it. "What do you *say*...?"

Judging by the look on her face, Sakura was obviously confused, and didn't pick up on the fact that he was asking to *sleep* with her. Kakashi immediately interfered, feeling a protective instinct like never before. How *dare* somebody even *suggest* laying a hand on his student in such a manner?

"Katsuo-san, If you don't mind me saying… I think we have more pressing matters to attend to right now." Kakashi placed a hand on his shoulder, a subtle and rather *daring* way of saying, *"Don't mess with my student"*.

"Ah, right. Of course. My sincerest apologies, Kakashi-san." Katsuo smirked, backing up.

Something about this boy gave Kakashi really made him feel uncomfortable, even aside from the fact that he'd just asked to bed with Sakura. All in all, there was definitely something… *off* about him.

"Kakashi-sense, I think we should probably head back to Izumi-san's place. That way Gochi will be able to get some sleep and we can talk about what to do..."

"That does seem to be the best course of action…" Kakashi nodded in agreement, before looking at Katsuo.

"You wouldn't mind that, would you?" Sakura asked Katsuo politely, who smiled in return:

"No, not at *all* ." Katsuo said, before eying Kakashi.

With that in mind, Kakashi decided that at the very least, he was going to no doubt have to keep a close eye on him.

…

"Hey, Saburo, we're back! I hope you guys didn't break anything while I was out. I..." Izumi started to call out when he saw Saburo, Naruto and Sasuke at the table upon entering the house, followed by Sakura, Kakashi, Katsuo, and Gochi. He noticed the guilty expression on Naruto's face, as well as the serious ones on Sasuke's and Saburo's. "What's going on?"

"We…" Sasuke started to say but upon noticing the other two in the house, he decided now wasn't the time, when he noticed the Katsuo and Gochi. "It's nothing important. Or at least it can wait… Who are they?"

Kakashi, as well as Sakura, immediately noticed the remnants of blood on their clothes, but judging by the looks of it, Sasuke must have taken care of the situation and patched Naruto back up. For the time being, that was all the only reason he needed to not bring it up right now. It wasn't like he really had the time to discuss such a matter at the moment anyway.

Izumi shrugged after seeming to mull it over and hesitate for a second. He then looked pointed at Gochi, who was shyly hiding behind Sakura(Apparently, he'd really taken to her.).

"This is Gochi and Katsuo. Gochi here is gonna be staying with us tonight because we don't know where his mother is. Y'all don't mind, do you?" He asked.

Saburo was the first to respond shaking his head as he gave the boy a soft smile. Sakura gently brushed Gochi atop his head when his clutch on her dress tightened and he pulled back further. In response, Saburo looked a little guilty, as if he'd scared the boy.

Naruto looked over at the boy and the way he held close to Sakura, feeling something well up in his chest. Sasuke seemed to be observing them as well.

"Fine by me." Naruto shrugged.

"That's great!" Katsuo smiled, before suddenly wrapping his arm over Sakura's shoulder, catching the attention of pretty much everybody in the room, especially Naruto. Sakura herself was also surprised by the contact, but didn't pull away, telling herself it was no more than a friendly gesture despite her discomfort. "It's wonderful to know that Gochi will have a place to stay for the night! It certainly beats being on the streets. Don't you agree, Sakura?"

No doubt, Kakashi was giving him an intense stare down. He wasn't the type who liked making a scene if he could help it, but if Katsuro tried anything else, he would have no choice to get involved.

"...Y-Yeah," Sakura hesitated for a moment, but quickly regained her composure. She gazed down at Gochi, rubbing his head and smiling when the boy looked up at her with a confused expression. "I felt really bad for him when I saw him crying… I can't imagine how scared he must be right now, not knowing where his mom is..."

"Katsuo-san...," Izumi suddenly spoke up, before any others could speak up. "Can you tell us more about this Juro person?"

"Yeah, you said he's the guy who runs this town, right?" Sakura inquired.

"I did… He's actually famous here, or at least his *name* is…" Katsuo mused over it for a second. "Juro rarely ever actually shows his face here, though, so it's hard to say for sure, but rumor has it that he's been selling girls and women for profit, hence the reasons for the disappearances."

"As in...human trafficking...?" Sasuke asked.

"Hold on… You don't mean..." Naruto thought it over, not once taking his eyes off Katsuo.

"Essentially, yes. It's exactly what you're thinking, blondie. Though it's probably best you don't get involved. Wouldn't want your *girl* to get caught up in it, now *would* you...?" Katsuo gave Naruto a smirk, briefly brushing his hand through Sakura's hair, sending a cold chill up her spine.

It was always easy to say that you would fight back against somebody touching you, but when it actually happened, people often froze up, not even *knowing* how to respond.

Whether he actually had any intentions to hurt her, it was hard to tell. But Katsuo was clearly trying to provoke them, especially Naruto, most likely because of how volatile he appeared to be.

Noticing that Kakashi, the adult in the house, was obviously about to get involved, Katsuo let go and moved away. But that didn't stop Sasuke from sending him a deadly glare or Naruto from snapping off some of the wood on the edge of the table in response to his provocation, silencing the room. However, given that Katsuo was no longer standing next to Sakura, however, they both forced themselves to calm down.

"...A few days ago, my girlfriend actually went missing as well." Katsuo suddenly confessed. "She told me she was going to take up a job offering somewhere on the other side of town, but she never came back. I can only assume it has some correlation with the other disappearances."

"Don't you want to save her?" Sakura asked.

"I'm not exactly the fighter type, doll, so *no* ." Katsuo said casually, shrugging. "Even if I never see her again, I'd much rather live out the rest of my life in peace, not get dragged into some drug dealer's human trafficking game. Juro's a big guy, and he's got a lot of goonies doing his dirty work. I already know I'd lose. I only told *you guys* cuz, *again* , I need the money for info-broking. I'm sure you understand."

"The *hell* I do!" Naruto suddenly snapped, standing up and slamming his fist on the table, startling everybody in the room. "How can you just stand there and act like your own girlfriend's life doesn't matter?! Aren't you supposed to *love* her? To risk *anything* to make sure she's *safe* no matter the cost?!"

At this point, he was fuming, and nobody could stop him. "And what about Gochi's mom?! There's no *telling what* those bastards could be doing to them right now... Somebody could be out there *raping* them as we speak for all we know, or even killing them and you're saying you don't even care…?!"

"Why *should* I? *It's not like it's* ***my*** *problem* ." Katsuo growled, glaring at him.

"How can you even-?" Sakura started to express her anger, but before she could finish her sentence, something snapped in Naruto and he punched him, sending him falling a few feet backwards.

"Naruto...! What are you doing?!" Sakura scolded him, but was also greatly concerned as she tried to hold him back from attacking Katsuo again and doing even more damage than what he had. She hadn't liked the things the older boy had said either, but she'd rarely ever seen Naruto this angry.

Kakashi quickly moved into restrain him as well. Everybody else observed the scene from the sides, and, at Kakashi's request Saburo quickly pulled Gochi out of the room in case things got anymore out of hand than they already were.

"...Naruto, I know you're upset right now, but you can't just go and pick fights with every person that pisses you off." Kakashi said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, just try to calm down… We'll figure this out together, alright…?" Sakura tried to soothe him.

At hearing her voice, Naruto clenched his fists, but finally seemed to calm down a bit. He then spoke back up in a dangerously low voice.

"...What they want is a female, right?" Naruto asked, gaze downcast, before looking up at him.

"...Yeah, that's right. Why do you ask?" Katsuo gave him a suspicious look. But he wasn't smirking anymore, which showed that he at least was beginning to take Naruto more seriously.

"Well, I say let's just give them what they want. I'll bait them with my Oiroke no Jutsu. That'll be sure to lure them in." Naruto said.

"...Huh?" Kakashi rose an eyebrow after a moment, when Naruto's suggestion sunk in. Of all the ways Naruto could come up with to deal with the problem, this was by far the most outlandish.

"Naruto, what are you even saying? This could be *dangerous* !" Sakura reasoned. "And how do we know we can even *trust* him after the thing's he's said? He could be leading us into a trap!"

"Well, if it's a trap, then I'll just deal with that when I get there. I'm a full-fledged ninja now, remember? I'm more than qualified to deal with something like this, ya know?" He gave Sakura a small smile.

"Naruto…" Sakura sighed, still worried.

"...It's a stupid plan, but it might actually work." Sasuke observed, speaking up for the first time in a while, catching everybody's attention.

"But Sasuke-kun…" Sakura started to protest, before decidedly giving in. "Alright, *fine* , but I'm coming with you."

"What? No way! I wouldn't want you to get caught up in this *too* , Sakura-chan!" Naruto argued back. What if something happened and he couldn't protect her? The idea terrified him.

"Don't even start it! My answer's final!" Sakura insisted in a stern voice. After a second, she reached out and softly brushed his arm, giving him a small smile. "Besides, I don't want you to have to go through this alone..."

She'd seen the way he was acting earlier. For some reason or another, this subject was really touchy for him. She was honestly worried how he might react if he saw or heard something he didn't like. Plus, what Juro was most likely doing was just disgusting. She didn't like it anymore than he did.

"...Sakura-chan, I..."

"Hold it, you two. Before we go through with this, we need to know exactly what we're up against." Kakashi said, patting them both on the head, before looking at Katsuo.

"Katsuo, if there's any other information you can give us, you better tell us *now* ."

"O-of course." Katsuo stammered, still rubbing his cheek where he'd been punched. He was obviously afraid of Naruto. "I do know that his men sometimes transports drugs on the ships that come to this port. It's possible... that they do the same thing with tho girls too."

"Maybe Naruto-san and Sakura-san could set off some fireworks or something from the ship they board to let you guys know their location when they come in contact with Juro…" Izumi suggested. "It probably the best plan we have, seeing as Juro seems to mainly hide in the shadows and doesn't really show his face around here."

"I suppose that would work." Kakashi mused it over. Not that he liked the idea of it.

"Perhaps… I do have a suggestion though and question, too if you don't mind." Katsuo said.

"Hm?" Kakashi looked down at him.

"Well… You guys are obviously Ninja, so is it really a good idea to walk up there as you are? They obviously would know you're on to them." Katsuo pointed out.

"Hey, don't worry." Izumi smirked. "We have some traditional kimonos and cosmetics lying around here. They can use those."

"What about *him* ?" Katsuo pointed to Naruto. "What was the jutsu you were talking about?"

"You'll see. Don't worry about it, alright? I've got everything figured out. " Naruto smirked, before the smile vanished. "Also..., Katsuo... "

"Huh…?" Katsuo raised an eyebrow.

"...If you ever even *think* of touching Sakura-chan again…" Naruto's finger twitched, a dangerous look in his eye. " *I'll kill you myself* ."

Katsuo had no response, and quickly looked away, leaving everybody in the room silent, especially Sakura, who was stunned by his proclamation.

Moments later, however, Gochi peeked into the room from around the corner.

"Are you guys really going to find mommy...?" The boy said in a choked up voice, tears in his eyes as he changed the subject and focus.

Sakura smiled, walking over to him and kneeled down in front of him.

"Yeah, don't worry about it. Your mom will be back in no time, I promise." She said, rubbing him softly on the head.

"You mean it? You swear?" Gochi looked up at her, hopefully.

"Mh-mn." Sakura nodded.

As Naruto watched her, the same warm feeling he'd always had when around her welled up in his chest and he gave a small smile.

"And hey, in the the mean time, you get to stay with me and Saburo. How does that sound?" Izumi grinned.

"No, I wanna stay with Sakura-nee-chan...Saburo-san is too scary." Gochi muttered, looking away.

"Hey, that wasn't very nice..." Izumi said, feeling bad for his brother, who looked down and began sulking at hearing that. Sakura couldn't help but laugh a bit.

"Gochi… I know Saburo-san may seem scary and everything, but he's actually a really great guy." She insisted.

"Yeah, and he's super kind too." Naruto suddenly spoke up, grinning. He probably wouldn't have said such a thing earlier, but Saburo had got them towels earlier to clean up his blood and had warned Sasuke when he had flown into his panic. "You gotta believe us."

Gochi hesitated for a moment, but smiled. "Alright… But hurry back..."

"Of course. We will." Sakura ruffled his hair.

…

A few hours later at day break, Sakura and Naruto were dressed up and ready to carry out their plan. Naruto's sexy transformation, allbiet fully clothed this time just to keep from being scolded by Sakura, had shocked everybody who'd never seen it before(minus for Gochi who was asleep in the living room), especially Katsuo, but they quickly forced themselves to regain their composure.

Everybody brushed off their fatigue due to not having slept at all, reminding themselves exactly what was at stake; that they could be saving the lives of numerous girls and women by doing this. Meanwhile, Kakashi and Sasuke decided they would separate themselves to keep watch at far enough of a distance that they wouldn't be noticed, but would still see the signal.

Kakashi hated putting Naruto and Sakura up to this; leaving them alone with Katsuo or in this situation in general. But in the end, he knew there was no way around it, if they wanted it to work, and Katsuo actually seemed scared of Naruto, rattled by his threat, so in all honesty, he

heavily doubted he would try anything again funny. Besides, they were ninja, maybe they could handle themselves after all. More than anything, he wanted to believe in his students.

Despite that, he also knew beneath it all, they were still only kids. This entire scenario was something else entirely. And the way Naruto had acted earlier… It was quite frankly rather alarming.

But again... he knew now wasn't the time to discuss such matters.

Before they left the house, Saburo held up a note to Naruto that said two words which was more than enough to show just how much he'd taken to Naruto and the others:

"I'm worried."

"Hey, don't worry about it." Naruto smiled. "We'll be absolutely fine. I swear we'll be back in no time, like Sakura-chan said, alright?"

"Still, take care of yourself..."

Saburo clearly meant that last line in more than one ways.

"Of course." Naruto nodded. "By the way, Saburo…"

Saburo looked up at him, inquiring what he wanted to say.

"Thanks for earlier… You too, Sasuke… I mean it... If it hadn't been for you two, I don't know how far I might've went… Or if I would have even stopped..." Naruto looked down, holding up his arm. In his sexy jutsu form, nobody was able to see the injuries, but they were still there.

Sasuke watched him for a second, knowing what he was thinking about.

"Don't mention it… Just... be careful, alright…?" Sasuke said in a low voice, with obvious uncertainty. It was still rare and odd to hear him show such concern, and one could definitely claim it sounded out of character for him, but it made Naruto smile none the less.

Naruto nodded, before smirking. "Right. And don't worry, Saburo… Izumi, we *will* save this town. You may have lost your home before due to bastards like Juro, but I'm not gonna let that happen again. I'll get things back to exactly what they were before, and I won't allow anymore women to be sold as slaves… I swear it."

Izumi and Saburo were stunned for a second, before both of them looked at each other with a more confident expression than they'd had in years.

Izumi grabbed his brother's hand, softly squeezing it in a reassuring manner, but almost seemed to be doing it for himself as well.

"We're trusting you."

…

" Just don't get yourself into any trouble *,* you loser *..."*

Sasuke expressed concern yet again, right as they were about to part ways, but this time he added in an insult to make himself seem more *himself* .

Naruto pointed at Sakura who was a few feet away, talking to Kakashi about something. "Well, I can't really make any promises considering the situation and all, but, hey, I have Sakura-chan with me, don't I? I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Naruto… Make sure you look after her…" Sasuke warned him.

Naruto then gave a serious expression, before leaving.

"I *will* . I promise."

…

A/N: I had considered just having Team 7 leave, but I felt this worked much better with the flow of the story and some of the ideas I had in mind. I hope y'all enjoyed this. ;w;

Chapter 13

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 13

A/N: Wow... I really hope this chapter doesn't come out as rushed or anything, I did try my best, but I suck at extensive plots like missions, so please don't hold it against me. I'm wanting to get back to the main stuff and back to the village as soon as possible and I've tried my best, so. ;w;

Also, a heads up for possibly a little NaruSaku progression in this one?

...

"Alright, the building's right over there. I'm sure you guys have everything figured out, right?" Katsuo regarded as they stood at a corner.

"Yeah." Naruto nodded, standing close to Sakura.

"Well, I guess this is where we part ways. It was a pleasure meeting you guys, especially *you, Sakura*." Katsuo smirked patting Sakura's shoulder. "Maybe we'll meet again some day, and you and I could actually have a chance to ***really*** *get to know each other...*"

"Hold it, Katsuo-san, I think I might have given you the wrong impression about me. Let me get one thing straight. I'm not some pushover that you can just mess with however you feel like. Forget *Naruto*, you're actually *lucky I* didn't knock your teeth down your throat for touching my hair earlier. Besides, I doubt your *girlfriend* would like to know that you've been flirting with other girls in her absence anyway."

"Woah." Katsuo was stunned but smiled, as he turned away, waving. "You've got fire, girl. I like that. I almost envy you, Naruto..."

With that, he was gone.

"...Wait, did he think we were *together*...?" Sakura paused for a second.

"Tch. That smug bastard… Who the hell does he even think is, talking to *anybody* that way? *He's lucky I didn't pummel him again just now*..." Naruto growled, clenching his fists as he tried to calm himself down.

She's safe, though.

She's safe.

He didn't hurt her.

No need to get so worked up about it.

She's safe.

He tried to tell himself this over and over again, yet the way Katsuo had looked at her, the way he had brushed her hair in such an intimate way... It infuriated him, probably far more than it had even upset Sakura.

Dammit…!

"Naruto..." Sakura broke him out of his thoughts as she gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know you didn't like that guy very much, and I can understand why, but you've been acting really odd this morning and it's kind of worrying me… Is there something... bothering you...?"

For a moment, Naruto was tense, but then began to relax at her touch. Reaching up, he hesitantly placed a hand over hers, feeling guilty for getting so worked up in front of her again.

"No." He shook his head, giving her a small pain-filled smile. "It's nothing. C'mon."

After a second, Sakura reluctantly dropped the matter(even though she most certainly didn't believe Naruto's reactions had been over just nothing as he claimed them to be).

They entered the building, immediately noticing how large the interior was. The floors had red carpets, and there was only dim lighting to be able to make out everything.

"Can I help you two?"

They looked over to see a middle aged man standing there. He had short brown hair, rounded glasses and a butler suit.

"Um… Hi... We heard this place was hiring?" Sakura inquired.

The man scanned them over before smiling, an edge to his eyes. "You heard correct, dear. Why don't you two come with me, urm... you have names?"

"Oh, right. I'm Hanaki and this is Sasako." Sakura said. Before leaving Izumi's place, they'd decided that using an alias was the safest course of action. Although Naruto had wanted to go by 'Naruko', Sakura had told him no, because it sounded far too similar. After whining for a moment, Naruto agreed that she was right.

"Right this way then, *Hanaki-san… Sasako-san...* You can call me Mao…" He smiled as he led them towards a hall.

"I see. Thank you very much for your help, Mao-san." Sakura smiled, hiding the fact that she could tell right off the bat that he was up to no good. Most likely, Katsuo was right after all about this place being connected to Juro.

She saw how Naruto was glaring holes into Mao's back when he wasn't looking at them, and kind of empathized. While it was true she'd been worried about how upset Naruto had been, it wasn't as though she didn't understand at least some of what he was feeling. As a female herself, the idea of other women and girls (or really anybody for that matter) being tricked and sold as slaves… really disturbed her.

How could *anybody* do such a thing or even *go along* with it?

She clenched the fabric of her kimono, suddenly feeling a bit of anger herself towards Mao and Juro, and any others working for him as she thought of Gochi and the suffering he was going through in his mother's absence.

Juro was going to pay for what he had been doing. That much she promised.

"I hope you won't mind waiting in here for a few minutes, will you?" Mao said, as he led them into a nearby room.

"No, of course not. Take all the time you need." Naruto said.

"Yeah. Just go ahead and do whatever it is you have to. We'll be fine." Sakura faked an all too believable smile, as she waved a dismissive hand.

"Oh, that's great to know. I'll have somebody back here... shortly." Mao said, before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

"Try not to worry too much, Naruto. We're *going to get him*." Sakura said simply, but conveying too many emotions all at once.

"Yeah." Naruto nodded, smirking weakly.

Before either had the chance to speak again, however, the floor suddenly caved in and they were sent falling into darkness.

…

"...Naruto cut himself again." Sasuke muttered, cutting the silence that had build between him and Kakashi, gaining the attention of his sensei, who was sitting beside him. "It was earlier… When you and Sakura were out… He got a hold of one of my Shuriken blades and blood was everywhere, I…"

He couldn't even finish the sentence.

"...Well, I *figured* that's what it was from…" Kakashi mused, lightly sighing.

"You mean you *knew*?" Sasuke rose an eyebrow. "Why didn't you say anything...?"

"Well..., that's because I could tell you already had it handled..." Kakashi said.

"*Hardly*…" Sasuke scoffed, pessimistically, trying to get rid of the thoughts in his head. "It was actually *worse* than last time… He had dozens of slashes on his arm and he kept screaming about needing to get rid of something... When I asked him what he was talking about, he wouldn't give me an answer…"

"Sasuke… You can't blame yourself for what Naruto's going through… Whether we like it or not, these kinds of things just happen sometimes..." Kakashi told him, receiving no response from Sasuke, who was obviously doing the exact opposite of what he suggested.

"...When I was about five years old, my father committed suicide…" He suddenly said in a low voice, gaining a look from his student. "For years, a part of me felt responsible for what happened… I thought that maybe I could have done something different and stopped him… But I realize now that it wasn't my fault, and I think I may even understand why he did what he did... When people are depressed like that, all we can do is do try our best to be there for them when they're alive and hope that they'll come through."

"Sasuke…" Sasuke felt a sudden warmth grow in his chest when Kakashi gently stroked the top of his head. "It's possible… that just by being there when you *were* earlier... you might've saved Naruto's life. You shouldn't beat yourself up for that..."

"...Have you thought about telling him...?" Sasuke wanted to know. He would have never guessed that his sensei had been carrying such a heavy burden as that. He knew he'd faced death, because Kakashi had said it himself on several occasions, but his father committing *suicide*... it was...

"...Maybe, but this isn't about me." Kakashi said simply. "And knowing Naruto… Such a thing would most likely only make him feel guiltier about asking for help..."

Sasuke knew he was right, despite how frustrating it was. If he found out Kakashi's father committed suicide, Naruto would be even more adamant about keeping things from Kakashi out of fear of making him remember what happened and burdening him. That was the last thing they both wanted right now.

Sasuke was silent for a long time, as if considering their conversation, Kakashi's reassurance that he wasn't at fault, making sure he was there for Naruto.

The entire time they'd been talking, he felt like he wasn't acting himself, and yet he couldn't stop. At this point, he just wanted to see to it that Naruto was alright and safe, and if he had to let go of his pride to do that, then so be it.

"...Naruto said something earlier about not wanting to 'fight back' against the villagers… He didn't go into really much detail about it, but I think somebody may be hurting him…"

"Hm… It could be *possible*…" Kakashi acknowledged his suggestion, thinking it over. If that was the case, he'd definitely have to have a talk with Tsunade about it. "The Sandaime always did what he could to keep the situation under control, but Naruto wasn't always under his watch, and now that he's gone, if something did happen..."

With a grim expression, Sasuke already knew what he was gonna say.

"He's not really the type that would just willingly open up about it…"

...

Naruto and Sakura had been blind-folded and led somewhere else by another man. In the fall, Naruto had hurt his leg, but on the exception of a few hisses from his part, he forced himself to pretend he was okay as he wordlessly followed instructions.

After an unknown amount of time, they had finally reached their destination and the blindfolds were ripped from their faces. They were then shoved into a dimly lit room, the door closing behind them.

Looking up they saw that they were surrounded by other girls. And so many of them.

"I would say welcome to the club, but considering the situation, that wouldn't really be all that appropriate right now, now *would* it…?" Some girl, most likely around the age of fifteen, who had tousled hair and had obviously been here for a while, spoke in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"Hey, don't worry about it. We came to get you o-owowow..!" Naruto started to smile, but hissed again as he put a bit too much pressure on his leg.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" Sakura quickly moved to be by his side.

"No, it's... nothing." Naruto tried to say, between gritted teeth. "I'm totally fine, ya know…?"

"Honestly, there's no need to force yourself all the time. Just let me take a look at it, will you?" Sakura separated Naruto's hand from his leg and took a moment to observe his injury. "It looks like you sprained your ankle. Try to be extra careful while we're here, alright?"

If only she knew medical ninjutsu or something, she might have been able to heal him… In fact, that would have been a huge help in general these past few days. To say the least, it frustrated her, that she'd hardly been able to do anything for him the entire time they'd been on the road, but she quickly scolded herself, because she knew now wasn't the time to focus on that.

She looked up at the other women in the room.

"How long have you guys been here?" she asked.

"For a few days at least." The girl with tousled hair said. "We've overheard some people saying that the ship is gonna be taking off tonight and that Juro is coming out. Wouldn't be surprised if we actually die in here before then though."

"Well, that ain't *about* to happen as long as we're here." Naruto said. "I told you before, didn't I? We came to take Juro down and get all of you out. You see... We're actually shinobi in disguise, so we can handle this."

"How can you two be so sure you won't lose to him?" The girl rose an eyebrow.

"Believe it or not, we're actually a lot stronger than we may look." Sakura smirked.

"Yeah, just trust us on this one. I promise you'll be safe with us." Naruto smiled.

"Alright. Well, good luck then, cuz you're probably gonna need it." The other girl shrugged. "By the way, you can call me Mei."

…

After about six or seven hours of sitting in the same spot, Naruto had only become more anxious than he was in the beginning, and when he started rubbing his arm, Sakura noticed it.

Kakashi had warned her this might happen.

"Hey, what's the matter…?" She murmured softly, placing a hand on his in an attempt to distract him.

"I…" Naruto once again found himself relax at her touch, something inside of him almost wanting more, but he turned away after a second, feeling guilty. "It's nothing."

"You keep saying that, but you've been acting strange all day… Just…" Sakura reasoned, gently tracing circles over his hand, as she didn't want him to start hurting himself again. "talk to me..."

Her last words were low, barely audible, but despite that, Naruto heard them and felt his heart break in two. He couldn't stand when Sakura got worried.

For a moment, he considered her words. Maybe he should just... tell her, and get it off his chest already.

No. He couldn't. She would judge him if she found out. They all would.

But, wait, they hadn't judged him for having the nine tails in him, had they? Maybe it would be okay.

But...

The warmth of Sakura's skin once again brought him to his senses, *comforted* him, *reassured* him even, and for some reason he just caved in.

"...Sometimes… there's these villagers who... They…" Naruto tried to force himself to say it, but he just couldn't. He began to tremble, trying his best to calm himself down.

Sakura immediately got the idea of what he was alluding to.

"Hey, I get it… This whole *situation* must be bringing back bad memories... You don't have to talk about it any more if you don't want to, okay…?" she smiled, feeling bad for having put so much pressure on him.. "Why don't we talk about something else instead?"

"Yeah." Naruto weakly looked back up and met her eyes with a shaky smile. "But what's there really to talk about in a place like this...? We've been stuck in this same spot for *hours*."

"Well…" Sakura tried to think it over, before smirking. "For starters, we could talk about the fact that you've been dressed as a *girl* for nearly an entire day."

"Hey...! Cut me some slack, Sakura-chan…! In this form, I *am* a girl, and it was the only thing I could come up with to get in…!" Naruto pouted, and yet that some how made it all the more hilarious.

Their entire conversation thus far had remained fairly low, in case any eavesdroppers happened to be passing by outside the door. And fortunately their voices had gotten drowned out by the other girls talking in the room, so they hadn't really brought much attention to themselves.

"Relax, I'm just *teasing* you. I have to admit it *was* pretty clever." Sakura said, laughing a little. "Come to think of it, how are you even able to hold out for this long? Aren't you exhausted?"

"What? No way…! Something like this is *nothing at all.* I have *plenty* of Chakra left." Naruto said with a grin, before hissing a bit in pain again due to his leg.

"...Sorry about your leg, it looks like it really hurts…" Sakura suddenly murmured at watching him. "I wish I could do more to help."

"You shouldn't worry so much about it." Naruto smiled with reassurance, saying the same thing he so often said anymore. "It's not *your* fault we fell. Besides, we'll be out of here in no time."

Sakura gave a weak smile in return, trying to push back her own insecurities.

…

Another six(or seven?) (they'd lost track) hours passed by of waiting. Sakura had dozed off, falling asleep on Naruto's shoulder. Naruto was on the verge of passing out himself, but knew he had to endure it otherwise his transformation jutsu would fail and he'd be found out.

But finally, after what felt like hours, they could hear creaking, and it appeared the ship they were on set sail. About thirty minutes later, the door was opened and some burly man with frizzled hair stepped in, holding an alcohol bottle.

"So this is the cargo, huh?" He said, chugging down some gulps. Sakura opened her eyes, at hearing his voice. "We have some real lookers this time 'round, if I do say so m'self."

He scanned around the room, before his eyes fell on Naruto. No grown man had ever *once* been able to turn their eyes away from Naruto's female form. He had learned over time how to appease to them, and find out exactly what they wanted in a girl, so he was used to this by now.

"You there, with the blonde hair, waz'yur name?" He slurred.

"Who, *me*? You can call me Sasako." Naruto feigned shyness. "You wouldn't happen to be the one they call Juro, would you?"

"Nah, I'm Kure, the guy who's in charge of where the ships go, Juro's on the ship next to us, he'll be coming down here shorty. Y'know, though…" Kuon kneeled down in front of Naruto, with a smirk, the stench of alcohol entering his senses, as he reached out and ran his fingers through Naruto's hair. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I… took *one* for myself…"

Naruto reflexively tensed and Sakura could tell just how uncomfortable he was.

"Wait, I wouldn't do that if I were you. Sasako's the *last* person you would want to have sex with." Sakura suddenly spoke up, gaining a look from Kure.

"Oh?" He rose an eyebrow.

"Yeah, she's way too promiscuous!" Sakura insisted. "Why not somebody who's more... *unsullied*…? Like *me*."

Her offer gained a horrified look from Naruto that essentially said, *"What the hell are you saying, Sakura-chan?! Are you crazy?! There's no telling what he'll do to you!"* without actually saying it.

"You saying me you'd be willing to *pleasure* me?" Kure smirked, cupping her face with his hand.

"Of course." Sakura said, her eyes unswayed. Naruto's entire being shut down.

"Well, if you're offering something so *generous*, who am I to turn it down?" Kure said, burping before roughly grabbing her by the arm. "C'mon."

Before she was pulled off, she whispered into Naruto's ear, *"I've got a plan, so stick to what we agreed on."*

…

Kure led Sakura to his room, numerous devises lied around. Sakura bit her lip as she tried her best to hide her discomfort with this entire situation.

"It was a rather big surprise that you willingly offered yourself to me back there. It's not every day that I get the honor of fucking a virgin, least of all somebody so *young*…"

He turned his back to her as he started to strip his clothes. "Looking at you, you didn't really seem like the *type* to do such a thing."

With a flick of her wrist, Sakura held up a Kunai to his neck, causing him to freeze in place.

"That's because I'm *not.*" She said in a low and dangerous voice, drawing a bit of blood. "Either you immediately have all these ships turned around, or I'll finish you off where you stand. It's *your choice* what you want."

…

Naruto was left feeling nauseated, barely refraining from letting go of his transformation jutsu. He wanted to kill the people behind this. He was used to this kind of thing himself, but that didn't mean Sakura had to get dragged into it as well! He clenched his fists, cursing beneath his breath.

He shouldn't have brought her along, he shouldn't have-

Suddenly, the door swung open, and a taller man stood there. The entire room fell silent yet again.

"Hello, ladies. I thought I'd come by and give you all a warm welcome - introduce myself. Most of you probably have heard of me by now. I'm Juro." He smirked.

"Thanks for telling." Naruto said, at long last releasing his sexy jutsu. "Because I'm here kick your ass!"

"A ninja?!" Juro exclaimed, cursing, barely managing to dodge Naruto's punch.

"Sir, we received words that Kure is turning around the ships!" Some guy with a sword suddenly came around the corner.

"Way to go, Sakura-chan!" Naruto internally cheered with a smile, realizing now what Sakura's plan must have been, but didn't say it out loud.

"You've got to be kidding me! Dammit, keep him here until I get back!"

"Yes, sir!" The guy said, as Juro started to run off.

"Hold it right there! You're not going anywhere!" Naruto shouted. "*Kage bunshin no jutsu*!"

He immediately created several clones of himself to hold off the swordsmen, before following after Juro, who was already a ways up ahead, as he tried his best to ignore how much pain was shooting up his leg right now.

It was in that moment that Sakura suddenly came around the corner and Naruto crashed into her. Both of them fell onto the floor.

"Ow, that… Sakura-chan! Are you okay?! He didn't hurt you, did he?!" Naruto was immediately by her side when he saw who it was.

"No, I'm fine! Was that Juro? Naruto, we can't let him get away! You hold him off and I'll worry about sending out the signal to Sasuke-kun and Kakashi-sensei!"

"Right!" Naruto nodded as he helped her stand up.

They both immediately took off towards the retreating figure. When they reached outside the ship they were on, Sakura slipped her hand into her hidden pockets beneath her kimono and pulled out the firework that she'd been holding onto.

She saw a candle fire above her, and decided it would be quicker than a match.

"She's going to give away our position, you have to stop her!" Juro shouted at some nearby men, who immediately took action and headed over to restrain Sakura. When one of them reached for her waist, she kicked him square in the jaw in response, knocking him off of her. After a second, she caught another guy by the arm and swung him to the side, slamming him into the wall. She managed to keep it up against a few more. However, the little bit of combat

training she'd had was barely enough to hold off against all of them them. She couldn't keep this up much longer! She had to light the firework and quickly!

Pulling against those holding her back, ignoring the injuries and scratches she'd gained in the scuffle, she finally managed to reached the flame and held the explosive up to light it. After a second, despite their protests, it went off, and lit up high in the sky. At that moment, she was outnumbered and pushed to the ground, unable to defend herself anymore.

Naruto himself was struggling against Juro as well. For a mere dealer, he certainly knew how to put up a fight. One fist was often met by dodging or several kicks to the gut in return, and it seemed like a never ending cycle. Naruto did manage to get quite a bit of damage in, however, as Juro's face was swollen, and his lip was bleeding.

"You're pretty good at fighting, kid. I'll give you that, but I'm telling you aren't going to win this...!"

"We'll just see about that, *won't we*?!" Naruto glared at him. He once again created several more shadow clones, having one jump on Juro(who failed to dodge this time) from behind and hold him back, and it was in that instance that some of the other clones from before arrived and came to Sakura's aid to free her.

Together, Sakura and Naruto's clones successfully managed to knock out a few of the guys, while the others fled.

"Sorry, but I'm not *about* to let you continue treating women and girls like they're your property to sell anymore!" Naruto had his free clone gather chakra into his fist and prepared his rasengan, the anger he'd been bottling up all day finally coming back to the surface. "Sex isn't something that should be forced on *anybody*, it's supposed to be a *choice*!"

Sakura watched them from the side, and suddenly noticed that Juro was holding an explosive. Her eyes widened and she rushed over to Naruto's side as fast as her feet could carry her.

"Naruto, get out of the way!" She shouted out, pushing him out of the way despite his confusion.

"Huh? Oh crap, Sakura-Chan is-!" Right as Juro let go of the explosive, Naruto realized why Sakura had done what she did and instinctively pulled her into his arms, shielding her from the blow. Luckily for them, it wasn't as deadly as it could have been, but it was enough to allow Juro the chance to escape and Naruto's back was burned beyond recognition, leaving him groaning in pain, barely able to move.

"Naruto, why would you do that?! I was trying to *save* you, you idiot!" Sakura choked out, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I couldn't allow you to get hurt… Not for my sake..." Naruto said weakly, looking up at her with saddened eyes. He never liked seeing her cry, especially not like this.

"This is all my fault..." Sakura looked down at him, her shoulders trembling as she held him close to her. "If only I had responded sooner, you wouldn't be hurt right now and I-"

"Hey… You can't blame yourself..." Naruto reached up and rubbed her face without thinking about it. "I'm the one who made this choice, remember? And this pain is nothing at all, really. I'll be better in no time, ya know…?"

"But you-!" Sakura couldn't even finish her sentence before Kakashi and Sasuke arrived on the scene.

"Sakura...! What happened to him...?!" Sasuke asked as he rushed over, noticing some of the flames that were covering parts of the ship, as well as the injuries covering not only Naruto, but Sakura too. This was beyond just a scuffle.

"A moment ago, Juro set off a bomb. Naruto protected me..." She knew that Naruto didn't want to see her crying, but she couldn't help it. Normally such an opponent should have been no issue for Naruto, but the bomb had thrown everything off, and she'd only made things worse.

Sasuke placed a hand on her shoulder, giving her a sense of reassurance, but also a feeling of utter helplessness for not being able to do more. "Tell me, which way did he go?"

Sakura didn't even hesitate to direct them where they needed to head to, the direction which Juro had fled to.

"Stay with Naruto and get him somewhere safe." Sasuke told her afterwards. "We'll handle this."

"Let's hurry, Sasuke." Kakashi told him, taking off.

"Right!" Sasuke quickly followed after leaving them behind.

…

Out beside one of the ships, Juro had jumped into a spare boat and was preparing to flee. There was nothing cowardly about wanting to escape with his life still in tact, he thought. The others would have to just deal with the clean up.

However, right as he was about to take off, a blade was at his throat.

"You're finished, Juro." Kakashi's voice, low and threatening, made his situation clear. "You can either come willingly, or we do this the hard way."

"*Well*?" Sasuke boarded the boat in front of him, glaring in his face, his curse mark threatening to take over. "*Which is it gonna be*? Personally, *I wouldn't mind burning you to ash* for what you did to Naruto and Sakura."

Immediately, Juro knew he'd lost.

…

A/N: Well, this will all be over next chapter and they'll finally be able to return to the village! I hope, again, that this didn't appear too rushed or anything, but seeing as this is

mainly a story about angst/hurt/comfort, I wanted to get through this mission as soon as possible simply because of how long I've dragged this mission on for. I really didn't like the fight scenes in this, because I literally suck at writing action, but I hope they were acceptable for what they were and at the very least got the point across?

Chapter 14

Story: Melancholia, Chapter Chapter 14

Dislciaimer: I don't own Naruto.

...

Within the next couple hours, all the women and girls were off the ship and the criminals that were in on the human trafficking were being hauled off and locked away.

Gochi was led by Izumi out to meet up with his mother. Sakura felt a warmth grow in her chest as she watched them hug and saw how happy they were to reunite, while Sasuke couldn't help but remember Mikoto, feeling a sense of longing, wishing once again for the past he would never be able to get back.

Mei chose to stay behind to offer some final words of parting.

"I really can't thank you guys enough. I honestly thought we were gonna die in there..." She said.

"Please, it was really no trouble." Sakura smiled. "I'm just glad we could help."

"When your friend there wakes up, tell him he was awesome out there, alright?" Mei smirked.

"We'll make sure he knows…" Kakashi said softly, glancing over at Naruto, who had long since passed out on his shoulder.

"Now all that's left is finding my no good boyfriend, Katsuo." Mei sighed.

"Wait, *Katsuo*?" Sakura rose an eyebrow. "If that's who I think it is, we just met that guy this morning! And I'll tell you, he's a total *sleeze bag*. If I were you, I would just dump him and be done with it."

This took Kakashi aback, but for some reason he found himself smiling. Maybe she had been a little more aware than he gave her credit for. Then again, he had also warned her to be careful around him...

"You think so?" Mei rose an eyebrow, before smirking. "He *is* a handful, that guy… I hope he didn't give you *too* much trouble."

Sakura shooed her hand, dismissing her concern. "No, I took care of it. I doubt he'll ever even *think* of flirting with me if we meet again."

Kakashi and Mei were left chuckling in response. Looks like maybe there was no need to worry after all, Kakashi thought, patting her on the head.

"Well, I doubt I'll see you again, but it was nice meeting you all." Mei said. "I should probably get going."

Everybody acknowledged her goodbye respectfully.

…

Shortly after, everybody finally headed back to Izumi's place, where Izumi offered them dinner, which only Kakashi accepted.

Kakashi and Sakura had patched up Naruto's back after assessing just how bad the damage was. Knowing Naruto, he would most likely wake back up the next day, but as for the injury itself, it would probably take several days to fully heal even with the Kyuubi's Chakra aiding the process. And then there was the matter of Naruto's ankle…

Kakashi sighed.

"Sakura, you should get some rest." He said, looking at Sakura, who was by Naruto's bedside. "Naruto's probably not going to wake up until at least tomorrow evening."

"But I'm fine, I slept some earlier on the ship." Sakura argued. It wasn't a lie. Even so, Kakashi could see the rings under her eyes, and he could tell that she hadn't been sleeping good at all the past few days in general. Even if she had slept *some*, it wasn't enough.

"...And despite that, you still look like you haven't slept much in days." He pointed out, placing a hand on her shoulder, causing her to jump a bit, as she was obviously surprised that he knew. "Just trust me on this. If you stay awake now, you won't be able to be there for Naruto when he wakes up."

Kakashi supposed he wasn't really anybody to talk, since, in truth, he hadn't even slept once since before leaving the village, but his students were the ones who mattered right now.

"...I guess you do have a point." Sakura said guiltily after thinking about it for a second, looking down at Naruto, who was sleeping. "I feel bad for leaving his side, though. I'm the reason he got hurt in the first place…"

"Sakura, Naruto wouldn't want you to blame yourself for this." Kakashi kneeled down by her side. "He protected you because he wanted you to be safe. Part of that is getting the proper sleep you need."

"I know, but-" She started to protest, but Sasuke cut her off.

"Kakashi's right, Sakura. We can't afford to have you passing out while we're heading back. I'll watch over him." He said.

"No, that means *you too*, Sasuke." Kakashi said. "*I'm* going to be the one watching over Naruto tonight. Both of you go to sleep. We'll discuss our plans in the morning."

Sasuke opened his mouth and was about to utter a "but" like Sakura had, but knew there was no point in debating with his sensei over this. He caved in, sitting down on his bed. "Fine…"

Sakura walked off, uttering a good night. Sasuke barely responded(no surprise there), but Kakashi returned the gesture in kind.

Sasuke turned over in his bed, while Kakashi was left to observe Naruto as he slept. After everything that had happened over the past few days, especially this morning, he couldn't risk Naruto waking up and finding his way to another weapon.

It was easy to say he was over such things, that he was over his father's suicide, since he hadn't wanted to worry Sasuke, or for the boy to blame himself for Naruto hurting himself, but the reminder was as haunting as it could have been. He knew this had reached a point that he would have to get Tsunade and Jiraiya involved when they got back to the village.

He couldn't do this alone anymore. He was exhausted, and afraid that if he turned around even a split second, he would find his student in a pile of his own blood like he had his father and the damage irreversible. The thought terrified him.

If he had taken Naruto with him earlier, he wouldn't have hurt himself again.

Not to mention sending him off to do such a task with Sakura had been taking a huge risk as well, not only due to Naruto's mental state but also the Akatsuki and other possible people that could have been in cahoots with Juro.

Then there was the possibility that villagers had been hurting Naruto…? And both Sasuke and Sakura had appeared to be skipping meals too, Sakura had even mentioned some kind of diet...

He rubbed his head through his hair, muling over the situation. He had been trying his best to stay as calm as possible throughout the mission, but it was becoming more and more impossible to put these things out of mind, to keep his own feelings in check and not let the past drag him down as it had so many times before.

Looking at the bandages on Naruto's arm, however, he let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding in.

Since other means of dealing with his stress were out of the question, especially right now, maybe reading one of his books might help him calm down some; distract him, because if that didn't work, he didn't know what he would do.

...

About five hours later, Kakashi had become rather entranced by his story, snapped out of his focus when Sasuke started tossing and turning in his sleep, uttering incoherencies beneath his breath.

He couldn't say it really surprised him, but that didn't make it any easier to witness, as he himself still had a lot of nightmares and understood all too well what it could be like. His eyes softened when he approached his sleeping student, noticing the tears in his eyes.

It was moments like this that he was forced to remember that beneath it all, Sasuke was still just a normal child, suffering from a past trauma. He always tried so hard to push himself, and keep things to himself, do things alone and yet it still showed through when it came down to it - he was just like Naruto in that aspect.

Reaching down, he placed a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "Sasuke, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

It shouldn't have been a surprise when Sasuke shot out of bed, reaching for his throat, his eyes red due to his Sharingan, and despite that, Kakashi was barely fast enough to respond. Fortunately, he managed to grab Sasuke by the arms to stop him. "Woah, calm down, it's just me...!"

For a long moment, Sasuke was glaring, not seeming aware of his surroundings.

"Let go of...!" He struggled against his hold until he realized who it was. "Kakashi…?"

"Yeah…" Kakashi said softly, nodding. "How are you feeling…?"

Sasuke was silent for a moment, before he snatched his hands away and turned around, irritated. This was the second time something like that had happened this week, the first time it was Naruto. "I'm fine. I'm going outside…"

"Sasuke…" Kakashi placed a hand on his shoulder.

"What?" Sasuke didn't look back at him.

"I know you probably don't want to hear this, but it might make you feel better if you talked about it." Kakashi said. "Judging by your behavior a moment ago, I'd have to guess that wasn't your run of the mill nightmare."

For a moment he considered opening up, letting Kakashi in, but he just couldn't. Talking about his own feelings had never been something he was good at. "It's none of your business. Just drop it."

And with that, Sasuke walked out of the room, leaving Kakashi sighing yet again that night.

It wasn't like he didn't understand. He himself still had nightmares a lot, especially over Rin's death. In fact, that had been yet another cause of his insomnia, the fear that if he even tried to close his eyes, he'd be forced to relive the moment where his hand was in her chest, blood covering his arm. Her face, her voice, it all still *haunted* him.

Knowing Sasuke, he could only assume that his nightmare probably had something to do with the Uchiha massacre. To do with Itachi.

He sat back down, letting his shoulders slump.

Honestly, he wished more than anything that he could help Sasuke, to make him feel better. But he knew that there was only so much he could say or do for him. After all, it was

impossible for him to entirely fix somebody else's problems when he didn't even know how to fix his *own*. And he could tell Sasuke needed space right now, so he left him be.

…

Several hours later, at the break of dawn, Sasuke had come back in and Sakura had returned to Naruto's bedside. It was fairly easy by the look in her eyes to tell that Sakura had barely slept if at all and Kakashi felt like he was at the end of his rope.

At least this mission would be over soon and he'd be able to get some advice on exactly how to approach the situation, because he wanted to help them, he really did, but a part of him was just afraid of making everything worse. Because while it was true that he was their teacher, there was only so much he could do to get them to listen to him.

Because in the end, it wasn't like he was their father or anything, and he highly doubt Sasuke especially would take kindly to such a notion.

At some point, Saburo peeked into the room, followed by Izumi. Izumi gave a soft smile at Sakura, who couldn't seem more worried for her blond teammate.

"How is he?" He asked.

Sakura was about to respond, but Kakashi beat her to it. "Naruto has always been a quick healer, so he'll probably be better before we know it…"

"I see, I hope he wakes up soon, I'd really like to thank him for his help with Gochi…" Izumi murmured. "Also, Saburo and I are going out for a walk into the town, but we have stuff in the fridge in case y'all are hungry. I know you haven't eaten for a while, so feel free to help yourselves."

"Ah, if we get hungry, we'll be sure to consider your offer..." Kakashi regarded him politely, but didn't really feel in the mood for eating anymore than the others appeared to be right now.

"Also... I heard.. from Saburo about what happened yesterday morning…" Izumi's voice was low, but not condescending. This gained a glance from Sasuke, who immediately knew what he was referring to. They were a little bit surprised when he held up his arm and showed them some scars on his wrist. "For about a year after our village was burned down, I used to do the same thing until Saburo found out, so I understand a little bit of what he's going through. But you know… I could tell on the day we met that Naruto-san is a fighter, so I'm sure he'll be fine as long as you all stick by his side and don't give up on him… Just try to be patient, alright?"

"Is there… anything we can do to help him? If you've been through this like you say you have, then you must know of a way to…" Sakura trailed off into silence, unable to finished her sentence.

"encourage him to stop?" Izumi inquired. Sakura looked away at Naruto, confirming his question.

"Well, I can't really give you a straight answer for that. This kind of situation is different for everybody, as well as the reasons for self-harming in the first place… I don't know how close you all are, but in my case, I think I was lucky because I had Saburo… He knew exactly what I was going through, and why I was suffering, since he'd experienced the same pain as me. But in many cases, it's not really that easy."

"If you don't mind me asking… What worked best for you?" Kakashi wanted to know.

"Well, that would probably be talking it out. If I hadn't, I don't really know where I would be right now." Izumi murmured.

Of course this wasn't such an easy plan whenever it came to Naruto, but as both Sakura and Sasuke had seen, it wasn't beyond the realm of possibilities. Sasuke had managed to get him to open up some and Sakura had managed to distract him from a possible break down. It might take time, but Naruto would just have to have somebody work with him.

"What about techniques?" Sakura suggested. "He seems to respond really well to physical contact… I've actually been able to get him to calm down a couple times now… And I think it may also help him to just… talk, not about *that*, but..."

Suddenly she remembered the stuff Naruto had alluded to the day before, about the villagers. Was the suggestion of physical contact really a good idea? Why had he been so comfortable around her?

"Just to be honest, if I may, the whole time I've known you guys, I've kind of got the feeling that he's not the only one here who's dealing with problems right now…" Izumi said. "Sorry, I'm really not trying to sound like a jerk, but... unless you're willing to try and work out your own problems as well, you might not find it very easy to help him through this..."

Sasuke looked away, as did everybody else, unable to deny it. Izumi was right.

Izumi obviously had grown a bit awkward when nobody said anything in response. He swallowed. "Well, um… we've got some stuff I need to take care of, so… I should probably go ahead and leave."

"Right…" Kakashi said. His voice was solemn, and he didn't look up as Izumi and Saburo left. Instead he found himself observing the sleeping face of his student and then Sakura and Sasuke, who didn't look happy at all with the consideration of Izumi's words.

Thoughts from early that morning resurfaced again. In the end, Izumi was right. The truth was he didn't like outsourcing or talking about himself. Perhaps, that was even truer for him than any of his students. He'd made that perfectly clear on the day he met them with his introduction where he didn't really tell them anything more than his name.

After all, Shinobi were taught to keep their emotions in tact, to just suck it up and move on when something bad happened; to accept death as just part of life, not dwell on the past. Whether or not he entirely agreed with that principle now, it didn't change the way he'd been hard-wired to deal with his problems, especially after his time in the anbu. So what good

would dredging up the past now, after all these years, do for him? Wouldn't that just make the situation worse than it already was?

More than anything, his students just needed him to remain strong for them. *He* needed *himself* to be strong and stay focused, and putting aside his own personal feelings and trauma was the only way to do that. His students were all that mattered.

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Naruto, who started to stir.

"Naruto?" Sakura called out, tears in her eyes from the excitement of seeing Naruto finally wake up.

Naruto groaned, before opening his eyes.

"Huh? What's going on? Why is everybody staring at me?" he sat up, looking around the room, confused.

"You idiot, don't ever do that to me again, worrying me like that! You could have got yourself killed!" She immediately took the opportunity to scold him.

At first, Naruto didn't really know what to say in response, because it was hard to tell whether she was more angry or worried, but the answer was pretty obvious in its own way because of the fact that she hugged him right after.

"Hey, I told you not to worry so much, didn't I? I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if something happened to you, Sakura-chan..." Naruto smiled nervously, before he suddenly recalled something. "Wait, that reminds me..., where's Juro?! Don't tell me that bastard got away!"

Naruto immediately moved to get out of bed, only then being reminded of his back and ankle.

"Try not to move too much…" Sakura managed to calm him down by placing a hand on his shoulder, even though he was still tense. "Juro was taken to prison, as well as Kure and all those other guys that were involved…"

"What about Gochi?" Naruto wanted to know.

"He's back with his mom now. We were just lucky that she was on the ship…"

"I see… There's no telling how many other girls that guy screwed over…" Naruto murmured, looking down at his fists.

For a long moment, the room was silent as everybody considered the possible fate of other girls who got dragged into this whole mess.

Finally, Naruto spoke up again.

"I guess we should probably start heading back to the village today, huh?" Naruto asked, a little nervously.

"I suppose that probably would be for the best. We wouldn't want to overstay our welcome…" Kakashi said. "But, Naruto, your injuries still haven't healed yet, I'm sure we could hold off at least another few days, if you need to."

"What? No way! I'm totally fine now, ya know!" Naruto grinned.

"What about your ankle…?" Sakura started to protest. "Yesterday, you sprained it when you fell."

"Oh, that? Well, I mean it still kinda hurts, but I'm sure Kakashi-sensei can just carry me if it gets too bad." Naruto grinned, volunteering Kakashi without even receiving a confirmation.

"Hold on, don't I get a say in this…?" Kakashi wondered, sweat-dropping, as he remembered how he had to carry him on his back the night before as well. He really shouldn't have been surprised, though. Naruto *was* still just a kid when it came down to it.

Kakashi stood up after a moment. "Well... if that's settled, then I guess all I can say is get packing. We should expect to start heading back in a few hours."

"Right." His students responded.

…

As decided, Team 7 left three hours later, and were sent of by Izumi and Saburo who once again held up a note, this time asking all of them to be safe, which Naruto and Sakura regarded with a smile. They still never once got to hear Saburo speak, but they figured it was alright. Sometimes, trauma it can just take years and more to get over. That wasn't something that should be forced. Maybe, one day, he would reclaim his voice, but that was up to him when he chose to. At least they appeared to be moving forward, it was all they could hope for.

Besides, they couldn't focus on Izumi's and Saburo's problems anymore. After all, they all had their own issues they were going to have to work out.

...

Their trip back was much faster, since they were able to glide through trees rather than walking on the ground.

Two days later, they finally returned to the village.

…

A/N: Wow I don't like how this chapter turned out at all, and writing this was a huge pain in the ass because I literally just wanted to get this mission over with. I hope y'all don't hate me for this. This whole mission Kakashi has been trying to keep his own problems to himself because he wanted to prioritize the mission and his students. He didn't want to worry them, but he does have his own fair share of issues to work out and that will come up in due time, because he too never had the help he needed either, so yah… Anyway, from this point on is pretty much just going to be focused on recovery and other such things.

Chapter 15

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 15

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

A/N: We are beginning to get back into some canon material with this, because I do still have to keep in mind the original time line. I don't want to change too much, only keep Sasuke in the village, and I have my plans to work around that with detracting as little as possible from his canon character. But that will come up in future, not just yet.

…

When they reached the village gates, Sasuke quickly excused himself, saying there was something he needed to take care of, and everybody else was tired from the long journey.

Despite that, Naruto was rather quick to excitedly proclaim his hunger. "Oh, man, am I starved...! First stop is Ichiraku!"

"Hold it, Naruto. You're not going anywhere." Kakashi said, stopping him right as he was about to walk off. "You and I still have some unfinished business to discuss with the Godaime."

The mention of Tsunade sent a pang of guilt into the boy's chest, and he looked up at Kakashi with a desperate look in his eyes, having been trying to avoid thinking about this possibility.

"What? Why? Can't it wait until later or something? I already told you guys I'm fine! If I need to talk to somebody, I have people I can trust now, ya know? I can go to Sakura-chan or even Sasuke or you if I have to! Just please, you absolutely can't tell her...!" He said, desperately trying to convince Kakashi to not get Tsunade involved. He would no doubt be stopped from going on missions for quite some time if she found out at the very least if she found out.

For a moment, Sakura and Kakashi were uncertain how to react by Naruto's sudden change in demeanor, and in all honestly, Kakashi wished more than anything he could listen to him, believe him, but this just wasn't a risk he was willing to take.

"I'm sorry, but this isn't my call to make." Kakashi said in a soft voice, trying to reason with him, but also making his stance clear. "I'm only following mandatory procedure and doing what is required of me as your teacher. If she says you're fine, then you'll be free to go. Otherwise, just try to cooperate, alright...?"

Chances were Tsunade would probably insist that Naruto was put under suicide watch for at least fourty eight hours, most likely more, and Naruto might hate him for it, but his student's safety was all that mattered to him right now.

Then again, he realized grimly, what did hospitals *ever* do about this kind of thing except delay the *inevitable*…? It's not like they really had any kind of plan in place to encourage people against those kinds of behaviors...

As Naruto started to grumble, Kakashi noticed that Sakura had stopped walking and was lingering behind.

"Sakura, what's wrong…?" Kakashi asked, expressing his concern regarding her depressive behavior. At hearing his question, Naruto turned to observe her as well.

"Huh? Oh, no, it's nothing. I'm just getting a little tired is all. I should probably head home and let my parents know I'm back…" Sakura said, waving he hand dismissively. In truth, she actually didn't want to go home right now, her anxiety about what Mibuki was going to say, or *do*, once she got back, yet again getting the best of her, but she didn't want to worry them.

However, Kakashi was no fool and he could tell that she was trying to cover up her feelings.

"Hold on, before you do that, why don't you come with us?" Kakashi suddenly suggested, catching her attention. For one, he didn't really feel good leaving her by herself as she was, but also having Sakura along might not be such a bad idea. "I think Naruto would do good to have somebody he's more comfortable with right now anyway."

Naruto, however, was stunned by the suggestion. Normally, he would have accepted such an idea without hesitation as Sakura's company was always welcome to him, but for some reason he was afraid. What if he let something slip out and she hated him for it? There were all kinds of possibilities of things that could go wrong. He immediately jumped to speaking up before Sakura could. "What? No way, Sakura-chan, you really don't have to put yourself through that for me!"

"It's not that much of a problem, is it?" Sakura asked, having actually considered Kakashi's suggestion, but became a bit awkward. "I really wouldn't mind, but if you don't want me here, I would understand..."

"No, wait, that's not what I meant!" Naruto immediately felt worse than ever, seeing the guilty expression on her face. Suddenly, the insecurities he'd been dealing with for the past few days, months and even years came spilling out. "It's just… This whole situation… It's driving me friggin' crazy... ! I don't even know why, I've just been so afraid everybody is going to start hating me or something, just like all the rest of them do… I-"

"Naruto…" Sakura gently caught his hand before he could reach for his arm. At hearing her voice, and feeling her touch, Naruto relaxed a bit. "We are *not* going to judge you, and we'll say that however many times we have to. If you want me to come, then I'll come. Alright?"

"...Alright…" Naruto said sheepishly after a moment of hesitation, his face heating up a bit as he felt himself lightly squeezed her hand back. Sakura couldn't help but give a small smile when she noticed that Naruto was blushing.

Kakashi, meanwhile, felt rather awkward at watching them, deciding to speak back up and make his presence known again, patting them both on the head. "Well, since that's out of the

way, let's get going, shall we?"

…

The whole trip there, Sakura once again took note of the way the villagers looked at Naruto; the way he tried his best to pretend not to notice. But now, knowing the supposed "reason" behind the glares and animosity towards him, it *burned her to her core*.

Naruto always put on such a tough act, but when it came down to it, he was actually really sensitive. And she could see it now, clear as day.

His entire life… He'd had to deal with this alone… And worst of all, she *too* had once been a part of it, shunning him alongside other classmates. Even since being put on Team 7, she *still* had had issues with tolerating him sometimes.

If only she'd known the truth all these years - what Naruto was going through every day, what some of these people had *done* to him - She would have *never* acted that way or said the things she had about him. The fact that Naruto still trusted her and looked up to her after all that… In truth, she didn't even *deserve* to call herself his friend.

"It's him… That boy.*"*

"I feel bad for them… Imagine having to be on the same team as ***him****…"*

Some whispers suddenly caught her attention, and, within an instant, something inside of her snapped. Quite frankly, the men were lucky, because right before she could walk over and pummel the people responsible for letting such slander slip out of their mouths, or even give them a piece of her own mind, Naruto softly grabbed her wrist, looking at her with pain-filled but pleading eyes. "Don't, Sakura-chan... I don't want you getting caught up in this too, ya know…?"

"But, Naruto…" Sakura's heart broke into a thousand pieces at hearing that.

"Please… It's okay…" Naruto pled in a small voice, tightening his grip on her hand, afraid of her doing something reckless and causing the people to get mad at her too. Besides, it wasn't like he could entirely blame them. They'd lost people they loved because of the fox inside of him. In some ways, he understood why they hated him.

"No, it's *not* okay, they're always saying bad things about you when they don't even *know* you…!" Sakura retorted, anger welling up inside of her, alongside tears of frustration.

"...They know the thing inside of me, and that's more than enough reason to justify it in their eyes." Naruto reasoned.

"That may be, but that *thing* isn't *you*...!" Sakura said.

"Yeah, well *it might as well be*...!" Naruto finally snapped at her, his shoulders shaking. Sakura was stunned for a moment, and only a split second later did he realize what he'd just said. He couldn't deny it though. Sometimes, he *did* almost begin to believe the things they

said about him, the things *Mizuki* had said about him, that nobody would ever love him, that he was just some monster. He tried to always tell himself that everything was fine, to tell others the same thing, tell himself to ignore what they said, put on a smile and pretend it didn't matter, but that didn't stop it from hurting. He doubted it *ever* would.

Before either Sakura or Naruto could speak up again, Kakashi placed a hand on their shoulders, interrupting their argument.

"Both of you two *calm down... and try your best to ignore them...*" He said, sternly, noticing the attention they had brought to themselves. He too had heard the things the villagers were saying about his student. And honestly, if Naruto hadn't stopped Sakura, Kakashi might not have either.

He was glad that Naruto had said something, though, because, if he was being completely honest, hurting civilians wouldn't exactly look good on any of them, and might just make things worse for Naruto. As such he knew he needed to restrain himself from taking such actions against them.

"But, Kakashi-sensei, they-" Sakura started to protest.

"I *know*…" Kakashi said in a dark voice, making it clear that he wasn't any happier about it than she was. "But picking a fight with the villagers isn't going to solve anything. This is something we need to take up with the Godaime. Now come on..."

Sakura still wasn't like it, but for Naruto, *only Naruto*, she forcefully held her anger at the villagers back, having no choice but to admit that Kakashi was right. "...Fine…"

…

Tsunade was up to her neck in paperwork and since shinobi right and left kept charging into her office with more, she was quite frankly on the verge of snapping from the stress.

"Tsunade-sama...?" Shizune peeked into her office.

"What is it?" She asked, a dangerous edge in her voice, suggesting that if even one more piece of paper was put in front of her, she was going to burn each and every single pile to ashes and toss her desk out the window.

Shizune smiled nervously. "Team 7 is back from their mission. Kakashi-sensei wants to speak with you. He says it's urgent, but it's not about the mission."

"Send him in…" Tsunade sighed.

When Kakashi entered the room, followed by Sakura and Naruto, Tsunade could immediately tell that he wasn't in good health. Judging by his eyes, he hadn't slept in a least a week, and judging by his posture, he was beyond anxious about something.

Kakashi thanked Shizune, who regarded the gesture and left them to their devises.

"Sorry for the delay… We had expected to be back sooner, but we sort of got caught up in some stuff on the way. It wasn't anything we couldn't handle, although Naruto here did end up suffering some back injuries and his ankle also appears to be sprained..." Kakashi scratched the back of his head as he handed her the papers for her mission report. "I really hope I'm not causing too much trouble by asking you to heal him…"

"No, none at all. I'll get to it right away. By the way, you seem troubled, Kakashi. Was there something else you needed to talk about?" Tsunade said, waving a hand dismissively, as she took a moment to skim over the report, before getting up and approaching them.

"Well, about that…" Kakashi started to say, a little nervous considering who he was speaking to, before looking down at his blonde haired student, who seemed to be avoiding eye-contact. "Naruto, can you show her your arm…?"

Tsunade looked down at Naruto, inquiring for an explanation without saying anything.

Naruto gazed up at Kakashi before turning to look at Tsunade, who seemed more confused than anything else, but was none the less patient.

"I…" He murmured, clutching at his arm protectively.

"Naruto, it's going to be alright… I promise you can trust her..." Sakura tried to comfort him, remembering how he'd reacted when she and Kakashi had first found out about him harming himself. She didn't want him to fly into a panic again, and she meant what she said. Tsunade had been so nice and encouraging to her and Sasuke last week and she even healed Sasuke when he was in his coma. She hadn't known her that long at all, but she already had found herself growing fond of her.

Naruto still refused eye-contact, hesitating. This wasn't any easier than when his secret had been discovered by Sasuke, Kakashi and Sakura. The fear of Tsunade thinking less of him for this when she'd just began to acknowledge him was just as overwhelming as this situation had been the first time.

Tsunade had no issues sensing his hesitation, as well as his fear. Folding her arms, she observed at him with uncharacteristically patient eyes, already having her own suspicions about what it was the boy was hiding. She needed him to be open with her on his own terms and not hers. Otherwise, getting him to trust her would likely be impossible.

"You're forgetting I *am* a *medical ninja,* kid. Whatever it is you're hiding, I can assure you it's nothing I haven't seen before." she chipped in after a moment to say in her own way that she wasn't gonna jump on him for it.

At hearing that, Naruto looked up at her hesitantly before once again gazing back at Kakashi, whose expression was relaxed, as if to tell him it was okay, just like Sakura urging him to trust her. Kakashi had known Tsunade for years, so he could say for a fact that she would at the very least handle the knowledge of Naruto's self-harm far better than *he* had.

Naruto glanced back down at his arm, feeling some level of ease at Sakura's and Kakashi's presence. Maybe… Things would be alright.

The boy then swallowed as he slowly reached up to pull his sleeve back, revealing the cuts on his arm. Some of them appeared irritated and Kakashi could tell he'd been scratching at them, reopening numerous wounds, apparently when he wasn't looking. Fortunately, most of them had already healed, thanks to the Kyuubi's chakra, but it still didn't look too good, and Tsunade could easily tell it had been far worse before.

For a moment, she was silent, having her guess confirmed. As a medical ninja, she was no stranger to self-harm. She'd seen the behavior in numerous people with various traumas, and even just in patients in general.

Despite that, as she looked at the angry slashes covering his arm, her eyes softened and a lump began to form in her throat. Maybe it was her history as a surrogate mother figure to Shizune or the protective instinct she'd developed as an older sister to Nawaki, but, without even knowing what overcame her, a strong urge to pull the boy before her into an embrace suddenly consumed her(just *barely*, she refrained).

Beneath the confident appearance Naruto always held up, he was still just a *child* and he'd been doing everything in his power to keep himself together. In a manner of speaking, this was likely his own way of telling himself not to give up, to push himself forward when things got too hard. Despite that, it still hurt to know that Naruto felt he had no other way to deal with those feelings, like he had nobody else to talk to.

"I'm sure you can see my cause for concern now… We found out about this five days ago." Kakashi murmured, his voice sounding a little too weak for comfort. "I've done my best to keep him from hurting himself any further, but he's had several slip-ups since then, so..."

"It's alright… Not everybody knows how to deal with something like this..." Tsunade mused grimly for a second, before reaching up, and gently taking Naruto's hand into her own. "Here."

Facing his forearm towards her, she took a moment to roll his sleeve back further so she could get a better look at the damage he'd caused. Afterwards, she placed a hand over the wounds, a green glow surrounding his arm, slowly healing the marks as though they never existed in the first place.

Sakura became entranced by watching the process, once again, her insecurities immediately coming back full force. If she'd been able to heal Naruto while they were on the trip, then so much trouble could have been prevented. If only she had the skills Tsunade did, she could have even woke Sasuke up from his coma like her, or healed them both all those other times they'd got hurt on missions for her sake.

"...Heh… You probably think I'm weak now, don't you…?" Naruto asked bitterly, letting his bangs shadow his eyes. He was certain she was judging him, they all were. Realistically, he knew it probably wasn't the truth, but he still felt that way.

"...No, not at all." Tsunade gave a heartbroken smile. "I just think… that you have some things you need to work out right now… And there's nothing wrong with that. Besides, you're not the *first* person I've met that did something like this, Naruto… There are plenty of others out there just like you."

"Wait, really? There are?" Naruto looked up at her, a bit surprised, relieved even, to know that he wasn't the only one.

"Mnhm." Tsunade nodded.

"Izumi-san… actually showed us some scars the other day... while you were asleep. He once did it as well..." Sakura said, catching Naruto's attention.

"That guy too, huh…?" Naruto pondered it. Suddenly, he felt as though his actions weren't so foreign or strange, after all.

"Naruto… I need you to be completely honest with me." Tsunade said, working on the last of them. "Do you have any more of these injuries on your body?"

"No, usually, I don't like doing it anywhere else." Naruto said.

"Usually?" Tsunade inquired.

"Well, I mean, sometimes, I do cut on my legs a bit, but I mostly just prefer my arm is all." Naruto explained.

It wasn't like Tsunade had any reason to doubt him. A lot of self-harmers had one preferred spot.

"Alright. I believe you." Tsunade smiled, gently, as she'd finally finished healing everything. "Now about your back and ankle… What was that about?"

"Oh, that…?" Naruto laughed nervously. "Um-"

At the mention of his back, Sakura briefly looked away with a guilty expression, before deciding to explain the situation for him, before even Kakashi could speak up and before Naruto could continue. "If I may, I'm assuming you skimmed over the report to get a basic gist of what we dealt with, but there was this guy there named Juro who was selling off women and young girls for profit…"

"Sexual slavery." Naruto added in, bitterly.

"We came up with the idea of infiltrating his human trafficking ship. Naruto used his Orioke no Jutsu to appear as a girl, and when we entered the building some of Juro's men were at, they led us into a room where the floor collapsed. Naruto sprained his ankle in the fall. And later, when we were fighting Juro… Juro pulled out a bomb, so I tried to push Naruto out of the way before it exploded, and Naruto protected me..." Sakura fidgeted with the fabric of her dress. She then smiled weakly. "Anyway, it's kind of my fault he got hurt, so try not to go too hard on him, alright?"

"I see… Thank you for telling me, Sakura. " Tsunade brushed her head, before looking at Naruto. "Well then, why don't we go ahead and get you healed up and then we'll discuss where to go from there, alright?"

Naruto knew he had no choice but to comply with whatever she decided on.

…

Of course, that didn't mean he had to like it.

"The *hospital*?!" Naruto exclaimed, after Tsunade had gave them her plan. "But *why*?"

Under any other circumstance, if it had just been over Naruto's back and his leg, Tsunade would have just sent him back home, but since Naruto had been self-harming on top of that, she couldn't just ignore it. She just couldn't lose him, not like this.

Spending time in the hospital certainly wouldn't get rid of the problem by itself, and nor was she stupid enough to think it would, but, at the very least, having people who cared about him by his side during his recovery would hopefully encourage him to open up a bit about why he was doing it and give others an idea of how to help prevent it in the future. However, that didn't make it any easier to see the hurt look in Naruto's eyes.

And furthermore, if it was the villagers causing this, Naruto needed to be away for a bit, because usually there was more than just one reason people self-harmed.

"You've already healed my injuries, remember? I'm fine now!" Naruto said, once again repeating the same mantra he had earlier. That he was fine, that he knew he had people he could talk to, etc.

"Naruto, you've been *hurting* yourself. Try to see this from *her* perspective…" Sakura suddenly pled with troubled eyes. "What would *you* do in her position…?"

"I..." Naruto started to argue back, but cut himself off and looked down with a guilty expression, seeing her point. And yet the truth was he honestly didn't *know* how he would react, because while he was aware it wasn't good for him, it always calmed him down and made him feel more in control of his situation. It helped him. He understood why they were worried, and yet down deep, a part of him still wished they didn't know anything or that they would just leave him alone.

He fidgeted with the fabric of his jacket, making his frustration known.

"I promise you that Tsunade-sama isn't trying to punish you…" Kakashi said in a soft voice. "She's just worried about you..."

"She could have fooled me..." Naruto grumbled.

Tsunade sighed. "...Look, Naruto. It's not like I want to do this to you, but I can't just let you go off and start cutting yourself again. You have to understand that."

That aside, Naruto was going to be Hokage one day. Before even coming back to the village, she had already decided that she would do everything in her power to pave that road for him. She wasn't about to let him risk his dream by doing something like this.

"Yeah, besides, Hokage-sama already said it won't be too long, just enough time for her to get an idea of everything that's been going on. We're all just trying to help you..." Sakura added.

"...Fine. I get it. " Naruto felt his shoulders slump at hearing that. "None of you trust me. It's not like I care..."

"Naruto-" Kakashi started to say, but before he could make his statement, Naruto cut him off, his shoulders shaking.

"No, just stop! Stop staying you'll fix this, that everything will be 'alright', because guess what? It *can't* be fixed! None of this *can*!" The boy finally felt himself snap, not even knowing where the outburst was coming from. "This whole village hates me, and I've long since accepted that! The only thing I can do about now it is the same thing I've *always* done…! Just suck it up and live with it! I'm not some baby who needs everybody to come to my rescue when something bad happens. I told you before, didn't I? My goal is to become Hokage one day and make everybody acknowledge me, but that's not something that can just happen over night. I realize that! This stuff takes time. I can't…"

Naruto trailed off into silence, his voice becoming weaker than ever. "I can't just force them to *stop*..."

Everybody in the room became silent after that, taking in the implications of his words. He wasn't just talking about the glares and whispers, this was something else entirely.

Sakura already knew what he was referring to, and Kakashi at least had an idea based off the things Sasuke had said and even Naruto's behavior the other day. And even Tsunade herself picked up on the innuendo. But with the mental state Naruto was in right now, outright stating their suspicions wasn't a good idea. But maybe… they could urge him into speaking.

"Stop *what*…? What are you talking about, Naruto..?" Kakashi asked, softly.

Naruto was quiet as he realized the gravity of what he let slip out.

"You know you can tell us, right...?" Sakura urged in a gentle voice.

"I-" Naruto felt his words catch in his throat as he around at them and then Tsunade. The concern in their eyes sent a pang of guilt into his chest and he swallowed. Everybody was worried about him and he hated it. If they knew the truth, they would hate him for it. He couldn't say it.

He turned away and pulled on Kakashi's sleeve, heading to the door. "...No, it's nothing… Let's just go..."

Once again, nobody could bring themselves to press the matter. Kakashi tried his best to give Tsunade a bow, before calling out for Sakura(who jumped a bit), questioning if she was coming.

She smiled nervously. "Oh, uh, you two go on ahead. I'll catch up later, there's something I need to talk with Hokage-sama about. And, Naruto, listen to Kakashi-sensei, alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever..." Naruto scoffed, causing Sakura to sigh once he and Kakashi were out of the office.

"...I swear, all he ever does is worry me..." Sakura sighed.

The woman sighed, feeling as though she could break at any moment from the stress.

"Well, that *is* Naruto for you..." Tsunade smirked, giving a small fond smile, despite the fact that she too was stressed after all this.

Perhaps now wasn't a good time, Sakura thought. *No*, she couldn't back down, *especially* not now. She'd watched Tsunade heal Sasuke and Naruto and she'd heard numerous stories about her amazing strength. If she'd had that kind of training on the ship, she could have done more to help Naruto without him getting injured, and him and Sasuke wouldn't always have to be coming to her rescue.

Her mother was right about her, that she did nothing but cause trouble for those around her, the people she cared most about, but she didn't want to be like that any more. She wanted to be able to help people. Not just Naruto and Sasuke either, but civilians and children too.

And the only possible person who could make that a reality was standing right before her. She didn't know if Tsunade would agree to it or not, but she had to *try*.

"Hokage-sama…" Sakura straightened her posture, gazing up at her with determined eyes.

"Hm?" Tsunade rose an eyebrow.

"I have a request." Sakura said.

"What is it?" Tsunade wanted to know, raising an eyebrow.

"Please…" Sakura swallowed. She hadn't felt this nervous since her days as a child, suffering from social anxiety, practically afraid to even look somebody in the eye for fear of being trampled on. Despite that, she pushed passed it, refusing to let herself second-guess her decision. "Make me your apprentice."

At hearing that, Tsunade studied her for a moment, once again seeing herself in the girl's eyes. Nawaki and Dan might be gone, but even so, she recognized all too well the fear of losing those closest to her, her desire to help them, to support them and everybody else.

A small smirk tugged at the corner of her lips as their eyes met. She could already tell based on what she'd picked up about Sakura, that, without a doubt, she had what it took to become a medical ninja, and was willing to endure whatever harsh training she had to.

"I've heard from Kakashi that you're very smart and you're able to persevere." She finally said, having made her decision. "Alright, I'll take you on. But this isn't going to be easy, you got that?"

"Y-yes!" Sakura stammered, a bit shocked. She hadn't *expected* it to be easy, but she was more than grateful Tsunade agreed to train her.

"But first…" Tsunade said. "There's something I need you to do for me."

"Of course. What is it?" Sakura asked.

"I want you to head to the academy and tell Iruka I need to speak with him. Make sure he knows it's urgent. He's going to have to cut class short." Tsunade said. She would likely have to find a substitute for the time being, but, from what she understood, Iruka was probably even closer to Naruto than Kakashi was. Perhaps, his involvement would help encourage Naruto to open up. And, even aside from that, she could tell that Kakashi was in no state to continue looking after Naruto by himself… He was clearly exhausted, even showing signs of insomnia. He probably hadn't got a moments' break this entire week.

"I understand. I'll head there right away." Sakura said.

Tsunade nodded. "Alright, you may be dismissed."

With that, Sakura bowed and left immediately after heading off to the academy.

…

A/N: I'll tell you, this was a pain in the ass to write, because I was conflicted between so many different ideas I could have went with (like whether I was gonna bring in Jiraiya yet or whether I was going to have Naruto open up more about his situation, but I decided that it was best to wait a bit, because realistically I'm kind of considering a past trauma of my own as I write in Naruto's part. I will get to it but I think it's best if I wait a bit. People don't just open up about everything over night. I want this to be relatable.

Chapter 16

Story: Melancholia Chapter 16
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.
A/N: I'm back with moreee. (Sorry for short chapter... I've been kind of busy)

...

For Sasuke, the Ninja Academy held a lot of memories, both good and bad. Some in particular that stuck out to him most had to be some of his sparring matches with Naruto. Ever since he could remember, they'd always been at each other's throats. But somehow, it had always made him feel a little… less alone to know that there was somebody out there a little bit like him. And yet, it also scared him, being reminded of his family.

So for so long, he'd desperately tried to push those feelings back.

And then he was put on Team 7, and once again, he was consumed by it; that familiar warmth. The comfort of being part of something important again, having comrades and people who cared about him, who *he* cared about. Sakura, Naruto, Kakashi… No matter what happened, he never wanted to lose those precious to him, not again. His family was gone now, but he had to do something about what was before him. He knew this.

No matter what he'd tried to tell himself before, Kakashi was right. Even Tsunade had been as well. He needed to focus on what was important right now. His recent encounter with Itachi, even with Orochimaru aside, had made him lose sight for nearly a month, but he couldn't let it consume him. He wanted - *needed* - to get stronger, but not like this, not the way Itachi or Orochimaru told him to. Least of all as the way things were.

Because of how close Iruka and Naruto were, He had figured Iruka might have some answers about Naruto's possible abusers or at least might be able to get some answers *from* Naruto about them.

Several children passed him by in the hallways, filling him with a sense of nostalgia. He hadn't even been by this place in months, so it was kind of odd, and yet as he watched the children bantering amongst one another, he couldn't help but stifle a small smirk, but chose to ignore the situation, heading on to his destination.

Upon reaching Iruka's classroom, Sasuke was familiar enough with the academy that he even didn't even bother knocking, instead just sliding open the door without hesitation. He knew that class was still in session, but quite frankly, he didn't care. Naruto was what mattered now.

Iruka was writing something on the chalkboard when Sasuke walked in.

"Oh, Sasuke!" Iruka smiled nervously, taken aback. "I didn't expect you to come by. Is there something I can help you with?"

Barely, the two picked up on whispers from Konohamaru, Moegi and Udon, who were inquiring why Sasuke was there. Sasuke paused for a second, noticing the way the kids were looking at him, but didn't even bother with formalities, jumping to the chase. "There's something I need to ask you… Preferably alone."

Judging by the look in Sasuke's eyes and his tone, this was something that needed to be kept private and Iruka complied. Whatever it was must be important. After all, Sasuke wasn't the type that bothered with such things if they weren't.

"Of course. Do you mind waiting outside for a second?" Iruka urged, and Sasuke did as asked, stepping out of the room. Shortly after, Iruka followed behind.

"Sorry about that…" Iruka apologized, scratching the back of his head, before speaking back up in a low voice. "So what was it you needed to talk to me about?"

"It's about Naruto…" For a long moment, Sasuke kept his eyes down as he tried to think of a way to word his question. "…I was wondering if you knew about the Kyuubi… and how that thing is inside of him…"

He was sure he did. He just needed to make absolutely certain to know they were on the same page.

"…Yes, I do… Why are you asking about it…?" Iruka wanted to know. In all honesty, this was the last thing he expected Sasuke to bring up, and he couldn't help but wonder how Sasuke even knew. Then again, it somehow wasn't really that surprising at this point. Many people did. And he was Naruto's teammate, so it shouldn't be that big of a shock by now.

"What about the villagers…?" He asked. "Do you think it's possible that they could be hurting him? He mentioned something briefly about it the other day, but you're probably closer to him, so I thought you might know something about it…" Sasuke murmured. In truth, he'd once in a while caught sight of what appeared to be bruises on Naruto's skin, sometimes his wrists and other places, even all the way back in the academy, but it wasn't all that often, and he usually just passed it off as training accidents because of how reckless he was. But now, he couldn't get the possibility or the concern out of his mind.

"No, I…" Iruka paused for a moment, pondering it, as similar memories suddenly popped into his own head as well. Just like Sasuke, he had never thought much of it either, since Naruto always claimed it was from an accident, but now that the idea was posed, he looked at Sasuke, suddenly alarmed. "What's going on? Has something happened…?"

"Yeah, Naruto's been-" Sasuke started to say, but was cut off by Sakura's voice.

"Iruka-sensei, Hokage-sama sent me to tell you she needs to speak with you! It's urgent…" Sakura said, before feeling a bit of surprise when she noticed Sasuke there.

"What? Right now?" Iruka was shocked. "I can't just *leave*. I've got a class to look after…!"

"She said you'll have to cut it short… Sorry…" Sakura told him regrettably.

Iruka shook his head, sighing. "No, don't apologize. It isn't your fault… Thank you for letting me know, Sakura… And you as well, Sasuke. I'll be sure to talk to Naruto later, alright…?"

If somebody was hurting Naruto, Iruka definitely wanted to know about it. And he would get answers.

Sasuke decided there was no point in telling Iruka about Naruto's self-harm anymore himself, because Tsunade clearly already knew by now and would be relaying the information to him herself.

It was just his hope that Naruto would be compliant because the only other person he could think of that *might* know was The Third Hokage, and he was *dead* now. And Naruto had already cut down Sasuke before, so getting him to open up to *him* was most likely impossible, which was the only reason he'd chosen to involve Iruka and Kakashi with his inquiry.

Sakura had a similar notion in mind.

She looked at Sasuke after Iruka and his class left. "What are you doing here, Sasuke-kun? I knew you said you had something important to take of, but I didn't know this was where you were going."

"Yeah, well there was something I needed to ask him… Come on, we should probably get going…" When he said that and started to walk off, Sakura wondered if she should talk to Sasuke about the stuff Naruto told her on the ship. As it was, she was certain she was the only one who knew about it.

"Sasuke-kun, wait…" She called out, catching his attention.

"What is it...?" He looked back, his hands in his pocket.

"There's something…" Sakura looked down. She hadn't even told Kakashi or Tsunade about this nor talked further about it with Naruto himself. But if Naruto left the hospital, then the stuff that had been happening to him would just keep happening. Somebody needed to know.

But… To say that villagers had been…

To say that Naruto had went through something like *that*…

Naruto had already had so much stolen from him… The choice to open up about it… That should be *his* to make, just that one, at the very least. And something in her just couldn't take that from him.

She wanted to let somebody know, she wanted more than anything to protect him and stop it from happening again, but the idea of taking the only thing he had left… it tore her heart to pieces.

She couldn't do it, not that.

"Sakura? Is something the matter?" Sasuke inquired for her to speak up.

"No, you're right, we should go. Naruto and Kakashi-sensei were heading to the hospital when I came here, so they're most likely already there by now." She said weakly, before walking on up ahead, receiving a somewhat observant glance from Sasuke.

Even if she did have to wait for Naruto to make the choice to speak up about what he went through, she would stick by his side every step of the way. It was the least she could do for him.

And yet, the same question as before once again nagged at her: What about when Naruto got out of the hospital? What if he still refused to tell them and nothing changed...?

She knew she needed to do something, but she felt so *helpless*.

…

So this chapter is to put some realism to Naruto's situation from both sides. Sasuke doesn't know the whole story, but just like Sakura, he's very worried, and Sakura is feeling like telling somebody else would hurt Naruto, since she wants it to be his choice to open up, but this concern is realistic. Because she also is aware that not getting somebody else involved could hurt him too, in fact far more. It's a lesson that, even if you're afraid to get somebody else involved, you should still always tell somebody if it's still going on. If it was something of the past, that's a different situation, because that should be a choice, but if it's still going on that's an entirely different matter and is very serious. You can't just turn a blind eye to such things.

Anyway, this wasn't a lot, but I hope you all enjoyed what there was. Next chapter, I'm thinking of bringing in Ino and showing more stuff with Iruka and Naruto, so ye!

Chapter 17

THE PART OF THIS CHAPTER WITH NARUTO AND IRUKA WAS WRITTEN FROM 95% PERSONAL EXPERIENCE SO I HOPE Y'ALL WILL UNDERSTAND WHY I DID WHAT I DID WITH IRUKA ;w; (THE OTHER 5% WITH THE RAMEN THING WAS ADDED IN BECAUSE NARUTO IS MUCH YOUNGER THAN I WAS AND I FEEL LIKE IT'S MORE IN CHARACTER FOR HIM.)

ANYWAY I HOPE YOU ENJOY THIS CHAPTER PPL CUZ I TRIED I REALLY REALLY TRIED MY BEST ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

…

"You called for me?" Iruka inquired, standing in front of the Hokage's desk. He could only assume she had summoned him here about another mission, but they'd just opened the ninja academy back up, so this was a little surprising and a little inconveniencing to say the least.

"Yes. There's something I need you to do…" She said. "Naruto is in the hospital."

"The hospital? Why?" This took Iruka aback. First Sasuke's odd questions and now this? Just what was going on? He immediately voiced his concern. "Is he okay?"

"…Well, for *now*, anyway… At the moment, Kakashi's with him, so I'm sure he'll be fine, but it isn't just any normal injury I'm concerned about, or I wouldn't have called you here." Tsunade said, not allowing Iruka a single moment of relief. "Were you in any way aware that Naruto has been self-harming?"

"*What…?"* Iruka sounded in disbelief, but panic spread into his heart, consuming him. *Self-harm?* He swallowed uncomfortably "…No, I didn't know… I mean I've noticed that Naruto's been acting a little odd lately, but I never thought that it was…"

Trailing off into silence, he scolded himself. He should have paid closer attention! Pried more to figure out what was bothering him...

How *couldn't* he have noticed it sooner?! It should have been so obvious! The occasional sensitivity to being touched, how he would sometimes fidget with his sleeves, and the way Naruto had even seemed depressed about something…

If this *did* somehow correlate with the suggestion Sasuke had made, then he would definitely need to talk to Naruto about this. So many questions and possibilities kept swarming in his head and it *terrified* him.

"I see…" Tsunade said after a moment, before sighing. "In any case, I'm going to be putting you in charge of looking after him while he's in the hospital. In the meantime, I'll have Ebisu take over your class. You don't have any problems with that, do you?"

"N-No, of course not, I'll head there right away..." Iruka shook his head. With something like this going on, having somebody familiar with him would be the best thing for Naruto and Iruka didn't mind being the one chosen to look after him.

"Also, before you go, there's something else I want you to look into while you're with him..." Tsunade started to consider her words.

"Yes? What is it?" Iruka asked.

"...It could be nothing, but earlier, Naruto implied that the villagers have been doing something to him. I have my suspicions on what it might be, but I'm not going to force him to talk about it if he doesn't want to. On the other hand, you know Naruto far better than I do, so of all the people who might be able to get some answers from him, it has to be you." Tsunade said, looking Iruka in the eye.

It wasn't as though they didn't have other means of getting the answers they needed to, but that would be coercion. It wasn't exactly a tactic she was fond of in a situation like this, and she would much rather allow Naruto the chance to talk for himself instead, if she could help it. After all, *Naruto* was the *victim* here.

Iruka knew what she was getting at, and why she was putting him specifically up to the task, but even so...

"Stay out of this. They are no longer your students. They are my men now."

Iruka trailed off into silence as he thought back to how Kakashi had shut down his concerns months prior when he had suggested against Team 7 applying for the Chuunin exams. Would Kakashi even want him to involve himself that heavily with a matter like this?

No, he couldn't focus on that right now. It was the Hokage's orders and Kakashi would surely understand. Besides, right now, Naruto was top priority regardless of who was with him.

Shortly after he came to that stance, and voiced his understanding. Tsunade dismissed him and informed him that she would be headed out to the hospital later.

Iruka politely bowed, making his exit.

...

Tsunade was then left to her thoughts, still trying to process everything herself. Self-harm, possible abusers? Maybe more? He was just a child! Sure. he was hyperactive and could be a bit of a handful sometimes just like any normal kid his age, but the one thing she knew for sure was that he didn't deserve any of this and if she found out her suspicions were correct, after all, they would have hell to pay for even daring to lay a hand on him.

How was it, that despite carrying all of that on his shoulders, he still wanted to protect the people who'd hurt him and shunned him so badly…? It was admirable to say the least, if not incredibly foolish.

But that was who Naruto was, always striving to prove those who ridiculed him wrong, just like he'd done when she mockingly challenged him to master Rasengan in one week.

He always tried to put up a tough and cocky front, but, the more time she spent around him, she had quickly began to realize that he was actually more sensitive than most, which seemed to be exactly what drove him to push himself so far.

She felt her shoulders slump, letting out a broken sigh. She wanted more than anything to just *make* Naruto's pain go away, to just make him say what or who was bothering him, but she knew that it would never be that simple. Taking things step by step and slowly was the only way to deal with this without making the situation worse than it already was or stressing out Naruto more. As a doctor who'd seen her fair share of cruelty, she knew this all too well.

He just needed time.

However, that rationalization didn't stop the lump forming in her throat as she remembered the sight of the angry slashes on his arms, provoking so many different images in her head. She tried to block it out of her memory, but no matter what she did - The caked blood - It just wouldn't go away.

As the Hokage, and as a medical ninja, she couldn't even help but feel like this was partially her fault. She'd watched countless ninja and even children and orphans die from things like this in the medical field.

I can't... I can't lose another... Not again...

Naruto had to live. She would make sure of it, no matter what, even if he ended up hating her for it. Naruto was going to be Hokage one day. His dream - she wouldn't let him risk it. *She* wouldn't risk it.

It was times like this that she felt the familiar urge to just take off and drink until she passed out. But she knew Shizune would probably end up lecturing her for hours over that.

She let out a shaky sigh, trying her best to keep herself calm, she had to stay strong right now, for Naruto's sake. Think of ways to help and support him through this.

…

Iruka made his way to the hospital as soon as his feet would carry him. He didn't even know what was coming over him, but his heart wouldn't stop pounding, guilt tearing him to pieces, as he blinked away the tears in his eyes.

Beneath his frustration for being so clueless, he truthfully just wanted to see the boy again, embrace him and ask him what was going on, let him know that he was there for him and hope that Naruto would at least try to cooperate.

After all, he knew what it was like to feel that way, so he refused to allow Naruto to go through this alone, no matter what.

...

When he got to the hospital, he saw Sakura and Sasuke sitting in the lobby. Sakura was obvious worried sick and Sasuke's brows were furrowed with irritation. Even without asking, Iruka could already assume what happened.

"I heard about Naruto, from the Hokage… I'm guessing they didn't let you in…?" Iruka gave a small nervous smile, as he approached them.

"They said only adults are allowed to see him right now…" Sakura murmured a depressing confirmation to his suspicion.

"...Well, it is understandable, considering the situation and all, but try not to worry too much. I'm sure the doctors probably just want to ask him some questions first, and get an idea of everything going on with him. It can't be too long before you'll be allowed to go back and see him, right?" Iruka said a bit awkwardly, trying his best to comfort and reassure them despite the uncertainty at his own words.

"...Yeah, maybe..." Sakura smiled weakly.

"...Well, anyway," Iruka rubbed a hand over her head. "I'm going to go and speak with him now, but if we find out anything, Kakashi-san or I will be sure to let you know, alright?"

"Okay... Thank you, Iruka-sensei." Sakura said, once again not giving much of a response.

"Don't mention it... By the way, you don't look so good, Sakura. Maybe you should get something to eat?" Iruka suggested with a bit of concern, noticing how pale she seemed. Sasuke had noticed it too, but had been gotten distracted.

"Thanks, but I'm really not hungry right now..." Sakura looked away, dismissing his concerns.

"Are you sure? I don't mind giving you some money to get a snack or something."

"N-no, it's fine, really! I just ate this morning. So you don't have to have to do that for me. Just go on back an talk to Naruto...!" Sakura waved her hands around to avoid worrying him any longer.

"Well... If you insist." Iruka said with uncertainty.

In truth, Sasuke knew that was a lie. Earlier that day, he had seen her not only offer Naruto(who appeared oblivious as always) some of her food, but also noticed how she threw away the rest of her untouched breakfast when she thought nobody was looking. And then there was the fact that she'd been skipping meals the whole week, even more than he himself had.

"Nah, I'm actually not really all that hungry. Besides, I'm supposed to be on a diet right now."

"Aren't you a little too young to be worrying about diets, Sakura?"

"What? No way. You can never be too young to diet! Besides, it's only normal for a girl my age to want to stay in shape or else I'll just get fat. Heck, I already need to lose enough weight as it is."

It wasn't like it was any of his business, her choice to diet was hers alone, but a part of him still couldn't help but wonder why she was even pushing herself so far. Why was she so insistent on losing weight anyway? There was nothing at all wrong with her size, if he was any judge on the matter. If fact, if anything, she was *underweight*, and if she kept avoiding food like that, she'd just end up getting sick.

On top of that, there was Naruto's self-harming too...

As it was, Sasuke felt completely and utterly *useless*, like he and everybody important to him was falling to pieces, and there was nothing he could do about *any* of it, and his nightmares only served to contribute to his bad mood and just kept making everything *worse* and even *more* frustrating to deal with.

"Iruka-sensei…" Sasuke murmured, clutching his fists over his knees, before Iruka was about to walk off.

"Hm…?" Iruka inquired.

"...Will you..." Sasuke looked down, his bangs somewhat shadowing his eyes and making his expression practically unreadable.

This was the only thing he could do right now, was rely on others, and he couldn't *stand* it. But he knew he had no choice in the matter.

And even if he did, he was sure he'd just everything worse, as he always did. He had no desire to apologize for telling Kakashi about Naruto self-harming, but he couldn't help but still wonder if it was the right thing to do. At the time, it was the only thing that seemed logical, because he didn't want him to risk his life over something like this, but...

"...Well, it's not like I'm trying to kill myself or anything. So just mind your own business, teme..."

"Really...? And what is it you're proposing I do instead...? Am I supposed to just stand by and ignore everything while you continue cutting *yourself...?! Is that what you had in mind?!"*

"Yeah, that's **exactly** *what I'm asking you to do!"*

was it really worth putting him through all of this? Was it really worth risking the bond they had...? Weren't they supposed to be *friends*? Weren't *friends* supposed to be there to help each other? What was he even doing?

Damn it.

By the time this was all said and done, Naruto might actually end up hating him for this.

Even so... What choice did he have...?! He couldn't let Naruto die, not like this. He couldn't lose those important to him, not again.

And that's when he remembered something.

"Hey, it's not like I'm the only one that's been pushing others away, ya know! You have no right to fault me *for anything when you've been doing the* same thing*!"*

That's when realization crossed him.

All along, Naruto was right...

He then looked up, meeting Iruka's eyes, will more intensity than before. "Will you... talk to him…?"

In that one question alone, Iruka could tell just how worried Sasuke was and more importantly what he was referring to without him even saying it.

In the boy's expression, he could see the desperation, a clear hope that Iruka would be able to convince Naruto to open up about everything, and find out everything that was bothering him.

For a moment, Iruka was taken a back. It had been years since he'd seen so much emotion and trust come from Sasuke. Ever since the massacre, he had become colder, and never really expressed his feelings about anything. He was always putting everybody else at a distance and didn't have any close friends back then. But Naruto, and Team 7... They had really changed him, and he supposed he was just now starting to see that.

He was happy for him. Not the situation, of course, but the fact that he had finally found people he could call his friends.

Kneeling down in front of the two, Iruka gently placed a hand on Sasuke's head, causing a certain warmth to enter the boy's chest. And surprisingly enough, Sasuke actually allowed himself to accept it.

"...You can leave it to me." Iruka told him in a comforting tone. "Naruto *was* one of my students, after all, just as you two were, so I'll do everything in my power to make sure he gets back on his feet. But in the meantime, I want you both to promise me that you'll also try to take care of yourselves so you can be there for him as well. Alright?"

"...We will… Thank you..." Sasuke(once again, letting his bangs hide his expression) said in such a low voice that if he'd been any further away, Iruka knew he wouldn't have heard it. Even Sakura was clearly a bit surprised too.

"Don't mention it." Iruka briefly ruffled the top of his head, before turning back to look at Sakura. "And that means you too, Sakura. Take care of yourself."

"R-right." Sakura nodded, feeling her face heat up a bit at how much concern he was showing for them. Speaking to him now, it was easy to tell why Naruto liked Iruka so much. He could be really stern sometimes to keep people on track, but, when somebody needed emotional support, he was also the type who everybody could go to for advice and was really kind, almost like a...

like a father or something...

Recalling how Iruka would often take Naruto out for ramen, and how Naruto always seemed so happy around him, that's when she realized it... The reason Tsunade had sent Iruka here.

That's right... Naruto has no parents. Then that means... Iruka-sensei... He's probably the closest thing to a father Naruto has ever known...

At that realization, she felt something unidentifiable bubble up in her chest. Whether it be that she was touched or that she felt empathy for Naruto she couldn't tell. But one thing was for certain. Iruka was, without a doubt, the best person Tsunade could have possibly gotten involved in this.

Whether or not Naruto would be willing to work with him was a different matter entirely but having somebody like Iruka on their side was nothing short of a necessity right now if they really wanted to help Naruto.

...

After leaving their sides, Iruka had made his way to the receptionist's desk to ask what room number Naruto was staying in. While he was at it, he also let them know right off the bat that he was acting on orders from the Hokage, which pushed them into immediate action.

A nurse then led him to a room which was in a separate section of the hospital, clearly for IVC patients.

When they got there, Kakashi(who was reading Icha Icha Paradise as expected) was sitting at Naruto's bedside. Naruto, meanwhile, was covered in several blankets, his back turned to his teacher.

Judging by what Iruka had already gathered, Naruto didn't appear to be in a good mood at all. Then again, it wasn't like anybody could blame him. In his position, anybody would be frustrated.

"Uzumaki-san…? You have a visitor… You don't mind, do you...?" The woman asked a bit nervously.

"Naruto?" Kakashi called out with ease when Naruto didn't respond. Iruka had just stepped in the room behind the receptionist.

"Like I care. Just tell them to kiss my-" Naruto quickly cut himself off when he turned to look over his shoulder and saw Iruka standing there. Within seconds, he jumped up in his stretcher startled.

He was no longer wearing his orange jumpsuit and had reluctantly changed into one of the hospital outfits at the insistence of both the doctors and Kakashi, so his arms were completely visible now, and Kakashi felt worse than ever, cursing himself when he noticed some new scratch marks on the boy's wrist where he'd probably been digging at his skin underneath the covers. He hadn't drawn blood, but the claw marks were still red and irritated. Iruka felt his heart break at being hit with the truth he subconsciously hadn't wanted to believe ever since Tsunade told him about it.

"I-Iruka-sensei? What are you doing here...?! Wait, don't tell me that hag sent you here to *babysit* me *too*…! I keep telling everybody I-"

In truth, Naruto was not angry, he was afraid. He was afraid of what Iruka thought of him, that he was going to get mad. Now that he knew, what was he going to say? Was he going to shun him? Hate him? Think he was weak? Every subconscious fear he felt, once again resurfaced, filling him with internal panic he was trying his best to mask with anger.

However, before Naruto could continue, Iruka suddenly pulled him down into a tight embrace, rendering him speechless. It was, in all honesty, the last thing he had expected to happen.

"Iruka-sensei…?" Naruto murmured stiffly into his vest.

"Naruto… I'm so *sorry*..." Iruka, whose body had acted entirely on its own, choked out without thinking. Naruto was taken aback by his uncharacteristically shaky tone, "I should have paid closer attention to what was wrong with you. I should have *been* there for you. God, I'm *so sorry... Can you ever forgive me*...?"

Scars of the past and bad mistakes Iruka himself had made coming back fresh in his memory, he held Naruto tight in his arms, afraid that if he let go, Naruto would be gone forever.

Self-harm was the last thing he'd ever wanted to see one of his own students or former students have to struggle with, least of all *Naruto*. It wasn't like he didn't understand it or the mindset that caused it, but it still frustrated him, not having been able to do anything to prevent him from reaching such a state, and even having been so damn oblivious to it when it was happening right in front of him.

For a long moment, Naruto was silent, trying to process Iruka's words, but after hesitating a bit, he reached up, warmth entering his chest as he returned the embrace, burying his face in Iruka's chest.

Naruto felt a large lump forming in his throat, practically suffocating him. The person he admired more than anybody else was right here, embracing him, crying over him. Suddenly, no explanation whatsoever seemed right anymore and guilt consumed him.

"...Heh, what are you saying sorry for, Iruka-Sensei...? I'm the one who should be apologizing, ya know..." he finally murmured beneath his breath, uttering his verbal tick without even thinking about it. "I'm the one who went and caused all this trouble over nothing..."

"But it's *not* nothing, Naruto. Look at me." Iruka reasoned, pulling back a bit. Much to his relief, Naruto listened. "If it's causing you this much pain, that you're even taking it out on yourself, then there has to be a *reason* for it, right...? Earlier, Sasuke told me that you mentioned something about the villagers doing something to you and The Hokage also seemed worried as well. Can you tell me about that...?"

After that, Naruto's eyes grew wide before he quickly looked and pulled away, trying to keep his breathing steady. Right as he reached up to his arm where the fresh markings caused by

his finger nails sat, Kakashi reacted even faster than Iruka, gently taking hold of his student's hand but firm enough to stop him from scratching anymore.

Naruto suddenly realized he'd acted on impulse and wasn't thinking about what he was doing.

"Sorry..." He murmured, feeling bad for causing Kakashi to worry so much. The receptionist was gone by now, or she probably would have gotten a nurse involved.

"It's alright..." Kakashi reassured him that he wasn't mad, but changed the the topic, letting his hand go once he saw Naruto was no longer trying to claw at his arm. "But Iruka-sensei is right, Naruto. You can trust us. Whatever it is that's bothering you, we're here to help you."

"...I-I... " Naruto started to say, wanting more than anything to just tell them, and get it out, but they would judge him. He was sure they would hate him, and blame him for it.
He *couldn't*. He swallowed, his whole body shaking. "I can't say it... I'm sorry, Kakashi-sensei, Iruka-sensei... I want to, but I just can't. I..."

The look of shame on Naruto's face burned into Iruka's and Kakashi's hearts, they wished more than anything they could do something to take away the boy's pain. But they couldn't. Iruka and Kakashi exchanged glances, deciding on who would spoke next.

In the end, it was Iruka who took the initiative.

"...Hey, don't worry about it… We completely understand... So you don't have to talk about anything until you're ready, okay?" He reassured him, a bit awkwardly.

However, Naruto kept murmuring incoherencies, clearly about how stupid he felt for self-harming, that everybody else was probably getting tired of him, that they all thought he was stupid, and other words that just tore him to pieces to hear.

Naruto *never* acted like this. So whatever it was that Naruto was hiding was clearly tearing his self-esteem to shreds.

Finally, Iruka had had enough.

"Naruto, just listen to me, already…" Iruka firmly placed a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. Naruto momentarily hesitated, but finally complied.

"There's *nothing wrong with you*." Iruka said. "You're just overwhelmed right now, and so many things have been bottling up inside of you, so you didn't know how else to let it out, am I right...?"

Naruto's silence confirmed his suggestion.

"Don't worry… I know exactly what you're going through right now, because I've been there myself, so I-" Iruka said.

"You have? You really mean it?" Naruto inquired, cutting him off, a bit of hope that he wasn't alone after all, shining in his eyes. The implication had caught not only Naruto's ear but also Kakashi's.

"Yeah," Iruka nodded, solemnly. It wasn't a part of his past he liked thinking about, but Naruto needed this. "so I'm here to help you, in whatever way I can, but you have to trust me, Naruto… Not just me, but Kakashi-san, Sakura, Sasuke, Hokage-sama, and numerous others too… You're not alone in this… You have so many people who care about you. You *do* know that, right...?"

"Yeah... Thanks, Iruka-sensei…" Naruto softly smiled after a moment. It was the same thing numerous others had been telling him over the past week, and it wasn't as though it didn't affect him, because if not for them, this probably wouldn't have been nearly as easy as it had been, but hearing such words come from Iruka had sent a comforting warmth into his chest, the same one he always got from being around Iruka, and he still couldn't place why.

"So, if you don't mind me asking, Sensei, why did you used to…?" He wanted to know, but couldn't finish his question, because it still felt odd to say.

Iruka already knew what he was talking about and decided there was no need to hide it. After all, it was years ago and the scars were hardly noticeable anymore.

"...It was a long time ago, right after my parents were killed in the Nine Tails Attack…" As he said that, Iruka noticed the way Naruto slumped, and he began to wonder if it was a good idea to talk about it with him after all. He knew how sensitive Naruto was over those things, ever since finding out what was inside of him. He reached up a hand to stroke brush a hand through Naruto's hair as a way to say *it wasn't your fault* without actually saying it.

Fortunately, Naruto seemed to relax a bit a bit after that, and Iruka continued. "I was hurt and confused... and feeling so many different emotions at the time that I didn't even know how to deal with it or let it all out. I'm assuming you can understand to a certain extent, for different reasons… I don't know exactly how it is to you, but to me... taking that pain out on myself... Back then, it seemed like the only thing I could think to do and I kept telling myself it was helping me somehow, that it made me feel better… But all it did... All it did was make everything worse, for everybody involved… And I never want to go back to that..."

"...So how did you stop then...?" Naruto asked.

"...Well... For one, it was certainly no easy task, but it's just like any other bad habit in the end. I just had to find something that worked for me and went with it. Over time, the urges became less and less frequent, and I know *you* can do that *too*, because I believe in you."

"...You really think so? I keep telling myself I want to stop, but every time I try, the temptation to cut myself only seems to get worse and when that happens, it's the only thing I can think about at all, ya know?"

"Together, I'm sure we can figure something out that works for you as well. You just have to be patient." Iruka said. "And you *are* Uzumaki Naruto, aren't you? Aren't you the person who always find a way to make the impossible possible? Just count it as a training exercise or something."

"Huh... I guess I never thought of it that way..." Naruto considered his words, wrapping a finger around his chin and giving a thought filled expression.

That's when an idea popped into Iruka's head. "I got it, how about a reward system of sorts?"

"Reward...?" Naruto looked at him suspiciously, before pouting. "I'm not a little kid anymore, sensei..."

"Well, what if I said it was Ramen?" Iruka proposed, immediately, Naruto's interest was peaked. No surprise there. Ramen was the immediate path to Naruto's heart. You offered ramen and you were his friend for life. That's just how he was.

"Alright, here's the deal." Iruka thought of a way to consider his words. "Any time whatsoever that you feel the need to hurt yourself, I want you to promise me this. I want you to come to one of us, or even somebody like Sakura, Sasuke or Hokage-sama, just somebody who can help you or talk you through those urges. Can you do that?"

Naruto was obviously apprehensive at hearing that, especially the "promise" part. So Iruka and Kakashi both had doubts that he would agree to it.

But his next words both surprised and amused them: "Well, how much ramen are talking about, sensei...?"

"It's all you can eat." Iruka smirked a bit.

"Every day or what?" Naruto cocked an eyebrow.

"How does twice a week sound?" Iruka sweat dropped.

"...Alright, fine." Naruto finally gave a conclusive agreement, before pointing a finger at the other party in the room that hadn't said anything for quite some time. "But Kakashi-sensei has to pay every other time or it's not fair to you..."

(Actually, it had nothing to do with the money, but he wasn't about to admit that.)

"Huh?" Kakashi's attention was immediately increased tenfold after that. *"Why do* I *have to be brought into this...?"*

In the end, however, he couldn't complain. If it would help Naruto, then he supposed it was worth it.

...

There was still some obvious hesitance on Naruto's part about being willing to ask for help, but much to the relief of both Kakashi and Iruka, he seemed like he was finally, ready to work with them, even if only a little bit. And quite frankly, this was the most relaxed Kakashi had seen the boy all day, perhaps all week, which was no doubt a good sign.

Kakashi himself had never exactly been that close to Iruka, other than as a fellow teacher, and through occasional chats and missions. He *had* heard about his parents being killed in the Kyuubi attack, however, which was something he felt some level of empathy for as another orphan, but finding out that he had self-harmed on top of that had come to him as a bit of a surprise to say the least.

Although it wasn't really his business, a voice in the back of his mind almost tempted him to ask more questions, even if only to know how to go about helping Naruto better.

Of course, as Izumi had suggested, each self-harmer was bound to be different, but it was a start if nothing else, and considering how much Naruto looked up to Iruka, he could only imagine the good this would do for him to have somebody to understand at least a little bit of where the urges to self-harm were coming from, and hopefully they'd even be able to get him to open up about everything else eventually.

Sadly, he was all too aware that, as Iruka himself said, it *would* take time. And they couldn't force that on him. They could only be by his side to help him through it.

…

"...Sometimes… there's these villagers who... They…"

As Sakura sat in the waiting room, she kept reflecting on Naruto's behavior and words a few days ago, becoming more and more anxious as the time went by, guilt beginning to consume her. Sasuke, silent as ever, wasn't exactly helping either.

She knew she probably needed to tell somebody what Naruto had implied had been happening to him, and a huge part of her *wanted* to, because she highly doubted anybody else knew anything about it, but Naruto had trusted her. Even if only for a few seconds, he opened up and *confided* in her. What kind of friend would she be to break that trust? But what if it happened again? Wouldn't it be her fault?

Sasuke had told them about Naruto self-harming without hesitation and now Naruto was finally getting some help, but wasn't this different...?

What should I do?

Logically, she knew the answer to that, but she couldn't bring herself to do what Sasuke had done, exposing him like that.

Sasuke was under a similar line of thought, at least in the fact that he was trying to think of what he could do for Naruto, questioning if he should try to bring up the subject again the next time he spoke to him, and exactly how to go about it. On top of that, he'd also noticed how worried Sakura seemed. A part of him wanted to inquire into what she'd been about to tell him earlier at the academy, because it seemed important, but before he could, a loud familiar voice rang out in the lobby, irritating both of them.

"Sasuke-kun, what have you been up to? I haven't seen you in months!" Arms suddenly wrapped around Sasuke from behind. Sakura didn't even have to have to turn around to know it was Ino. Sasuke didn't really look happy, but made no effort to push her off.

"What do you want, Ino Pig? Can't you see we're busy? And get off of Sasuke-kun!" Sakura snapped, glaring at her. Despite that, her heart didn't quite feel as behind it as it usually did.

"Oh, look, it's Forehead. I didn't even see you there." Ino smirked mockingly, but seconds after noticed the dark rings under Sakura's eyes. She frowned a bit at that. "So what's up, anyway? What are you two doing here at the hospital?

"Can't you tell? Obviously, they're here to visit somebody. Just leave them alone already, Ino..." A tired voice scolded her. It was Shikamaru.

"Hmph, fine." Ino scoffed, backing off. "But I'm not leaving."

Shikamaru sighed before looking over at Sasuke, hands in his pockets.

"...I'm guessing it's Naruto again?" He inquired.

This time it was Sasuke who responded, albeit curtly. "Yeah."

Shikamaru and Ino were silent after that, waiting for a response, which unsurprisingly never came although Sakura was debating if they should tell them. This wasn't a normal visit to the hospital after all.

"...So what happened, if you don't mind me asking? It seems like it must be pretty serious."

Sakura glanced at Sasuke with uncertainty, and Sasuke himself seemed a bit hesitant as well, but in the end, they figured it was alright if they told them. Shikamaru was a pretty good friend to Naruto at this point, even if he sometimes seemed like he didn't care, and although Ino wasn't as close to Naruto, Ino was Sakura's best friend, and Sakura knew Ino well enough to know just how kind she could be when it came down to it.

"Go ahead, Sakura, you tell them. There's something I need to take care of... I'll be back shortly..." Sasuke said, before getting up. He didn't intend to come off rude, but quite frankly, he didn't think he could take just sitting around any longer. And besides, Iruka was right about the fact that Sakura didn't exactly look that well. Things would get even more troublesome for him if she ended up passing out here at the hospital, so maybe he could buy some kind of snack and beverage for her to eat and drink while he was at it.

Sakura was about to call out to him, but decided to give Sasuke some space.

Ino noticed the way they were acting and couldn't help but get the feeling that something was really wrong. She'd rarely ever seen either of them *this worked up*. And Sakura's appearance as it was now was kind of concerning to say the least.

When Sasuke was gone she turned back to Sakura. "What's the matter with you two? It *is Naruto* we're talking about, so whatever it is, I'm sure it can't be *that* bad…! Come on, Sakura, just tell us already."

"Ino…!" Shikamaru hissed. "Just give her some time..."

"I..." Ino immediately realized how insensitive that sounded. She just wanted to say in her own way that Sakura didn't need to worry because Naruto was strong, but it'd come out meaner than anticipated. After all, it really might be bad if only because it WAS Naruto. "Sorry, Sakura… I shouldn't have-"

"No," Sakura shook her head, smiling weakly. "It's okay, really…"

She then looked down, fidgeting with the fabric of her dress. "Anyway, Naruto's... He's been hurting himself, so Kakashi-sensei and Iruka-sensei are with him right now. We're not allowed to go back there yet, though, so Sasuke-kun's been on edge…"

She almost added "*And I'm not exactly feeling any better myself."* but left it unvoiced. It was pretty obvious though, so it didn't even need to be said.

"When you say he's been hurting himself, are you referring to some kind of training accident, or something?" Shikamaru wanted to know. If that was the case, then what was the point of not allowing visitation?

"No, it's not that..." Sakura cut him off with a grim expression. "He's been cutting himself with kunai knives..."

"Wait, like, on *purpose*?" Shikamaru immediately grew alarmed at that knowledge.

"Why in the world would he do something like that?" Ino asked, a bit shocked. She may not be as close to Naruto as Sakura, Sasuke, or Shikamaru, but she still considered him to be a friend, so whether or not she was worried wasn't even a question.

"It's… really complicated… Sorry..." Sakura said vaguely, feeling bad for not being able to tell them more. The self-harm was one thing, so at least they'd know why Naruto was in the hospital, but The Kyuubi and the villagers… That was an entirely different matter.

"No, don't apologize… I'm just glad you told us..." Shikamaru said with a bit of frustration, before looking away. He obviously got the message and decided it was best not to press the matter right now. "I do have some other questions for him, but I guess it'll just have to wait until he can have visitors again to ask him myself… Anyway, I'm heading on back to see how Chouji's doing."

It wasn't as though he wasn't worried about Naruto as well, but he couldn't let it consume him. And he had to wait until Naruto was allowed visitors before he could do anything about it anyway,

"Wait, Chouji's here too?" Sakura rose an eyebrow.

"Yeah, but it's nothing serious. Just another case of food poisoning." Shikamaru drawled lazily.

"Another?" Sakura gave a shaky smirk, her eyebrow twitching. It shouldn't really be a surprise. "Well, I hope he gets better. Tell him hi for me, will you?"

"Yeah, sure thing. Are you coming, Ino?" Shikamaru wanted to know.

"Nah, you go on ahead, I think I'll stay out here a bit longer with Sakura." Ino said, waving a hand dismissively.

"Well, whatever… Just meet up with us when you're done, alright?" Shikamaru yawned.

"Right, I will." Ino smiled, before Shikamaru left.

Ino wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "So what else is going on, Forehead? You look like you haven't slept in days."

She called her by her nickname to make things less awkward between them than they already were.

"...Truthfully, I haven't." Sakura openly admitted. "I've just been so worried…"

"You mean about Naruto…?" Ino questioned.

Sakura didn't even have to give an answer for Ino to know what it was. Of course it wasn't just over her concern for Naruto but that was a huge part of it.

"Hey, Ino…?"

"Hm?" At hearing Sakura say her name, Ino tilted her head, to show she was there to listen to her. "What is it, Sakura...?"

"Can I… ask you a question…?" Sakura asked.

Ino couldn't stand seeing her friend this depressed, even if they were rivals, so, if she could help, even a little, she would. "Sure, anything."

Sakura once again hesitated, but in the end went through with her question. Even though they were rivals, even though they bickered over stupid things sometimes, down deep Sakura had nothing but admiration for Ino and she valued her opinion more than she would ever even admit aloud. Surely, *she* would know what to do. "...If you… If you found out that something really bad was happening to somebody you cared about… And you knew what it was, but nobody else did, would you tell somebody if that person could stop it from happening any more? Even if it meant risking your friend hating you and feeling shame for something that was completely beyond their control? Even if it meant taking away the only thing they had left by telling?"

"...Without a doubt." Ino said confidently after thinking it over. "If somebody you care about is being hurt or being put into some kind of bad situation against their will, and letting somebody else know might stop it from happening, then wouldn't it make you just as guilty if you don't do anything about it or at least try to?... I'd say go for it, if it really means that much to you. By the way… This person you're talking about, it wouldn't happen to be Naruto, would it?"

Sakura nodded to confirm her suspicions. "Yeah, and I think it's part of what's causing him to hurt himself too."

"Then you have to *tell* somebody, Sakura...! If you think you can stop it from happening, then do it. Otherwise, nothing will change at all. I can't say for sure since I don't know what it is that you're so worried about, but, believe me, Naruto will probably end up suffering

even *more* if you *don't* do anything about it. My suggestion is you go to Hokage-sama herself. She'll know what to do."

"You really think I should...?" Sakura said, a bit nervously.

"Yeah, only an idiot would question her authority!" Ino smirked. "By the way, that reminds me… How have things with your mom been going? Every time I see you two together anymore, you're always arguing."

Ino had never exactly been that fond of Mibuki. And the more time she spent around her the more fake she seemed each and every time. She always appeared to be trying to keep up an appearance of a picture perfect enthusiastic and caring mother, but it was clear that beneath that surface she was a complete narcissist, and she'd lost track of the times Mibuki had come to the Yamanaka flower shop and irritated the hell out of her, especially when Sakura herself was present. Not many others knew about it or took it serious because they didn't associate much with her, but Ino quite frankly couldn't stand her nor her personality. Kizashi, meanwhile, was a different matter all together. The guy never cared to question Mibuki at all and even sided with her.

It infuriated her, but Sakura always insisted she was used to the situation and that she could take it, even if Sakura did talk more with Ino about her parents than she did anybody else, if only for the fact that they were childhood friends and knew each other's families quite well.

"It's about the same as always, I guess. All she ever does anymore is criticize me, and she keeps telling me I should quit being a ninja. I try not to pay much attention to her when she's like that, but a few days ago we got into a huge argument and she kind of slapped me, so I-" Sakura caught her breath when she realized what she'd said, panicking a bit, looking at Ino, who was greatly concerned.

"Hold on, She *slapped* you...?!" Ino exclaimed in a low voice.

"Yeah, but it wasn't that hard at all and I'm completely fine now!" Sakura immediately reasoned. It was a partial lie, because it had left a bruise and the only reason she was fine was because Tsunade had healed her afterwards. "Besides, I kind of said something I shouldn't have and made her mad. It's my fault. And this is the first time anything like that happened, so don't worry so much."

Despite her insistence, Ino clearly wasn't happy. "But, Sakura… She *hit* you… Shouldn't you, I don't know, *tell* somebody...?"

"Like I said, it's never happened before, and it wasn't even enough to leave a mark, so it's nothing. The last thing I'd want to do is make a scene over something like that." Sakura dismissed her concern with a wave of the hand. In truth, she was actually afraid, but once again, nobody needed to know that.

"...Alright… If you say so. But if she hurts you anymore, promise me you'll come talk to me... Deal?" Ino had the feeling she was holding something back, but without the proper knowledge or confirmation, she couldn't say anything for sure, nor could she take any kind of action.

Sakura gave a smile in return that was clearly forced. "Deal."

With that image burned into her memory, a lump forming in her throat, Ino suddenly felt like she was eating her own words and the advice she'd given Sakura just minutes before. She was a *complete hypocrite,* but she didn't want to risk their friendship in the process and she tried her best to tell herself that things really would be okay like Sakura said they would.

"*Although*..., if something *does* happen and you have to be taken away from your home or something, you *could* always come stay with me for a while." Ino decided to lay out the suggestion, before joking a bit. "Your forehead isn't so big that it couldn't fit in my place, after all."

At hearing that, Sakura smirked sarcastically. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass. I'd prefer not to sleep in a pigsty."

From there, a long tangent of name calling started, before it once again reached the topic of Tsunade.

"By the way, Ino Pig, earlier, I asked Hokage-sama to make me her apprentice and she agreed, so if you don't do something *soon*, I doubt you'll *ever* have any chance of catching up with me."

"Apprentice? Well, if that's the case, *I'll* ask to train under her as *well* then! Then we'll just *see* who's better than who, *won't* we, Forehead?"

"That depends, do you really think you're up for the challenge? I hear the becoming a medical ninja is actually quite difficult. I'm not so sure you could handle it."

"Handle it? Who do you even think you're talking to?! You're the one *I'm* worried about..."

And the banter of the rivals continued, finally followed by the eventually laughter of the both them.

...

A/N: Finally a decent length chapter again. I hope it was satisfactory.

Also: There's not really anything in the manga about Ino training directly under Tsunade, from what I remember, but that's actually one thing I really liked in the anime, but it works for the sake of this story, so I've decided to keep it. I hope you all don't mind.

Lmao I don't like how this turned out tbh, but I tried my bes

Chapter 18

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 18

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

1. ALREADY OVER 200 KUDOS THANK YOU SO MUCH EVERYBODY FOR ALL YOUR KIND WORDS AND SUPPORT, IT MEANS SO MUCH ;w;

2. There will be a few more NaruSaku hints in this. Soon, I'll start developing it more though so be looking forward to that!

3. I know I keep saying that I'll get to focusing on Kakashi eventually, but I really do mean it. His students have so many issues that it's been hard to prioritize himself but the adults still have plenty of their own problems they need to work out. Team 7 is my main focus for this, so I will be going into Kakashi more very soon, and I think that's another benefit of having Iruka and Tsunade, plus eventually Jiraiya in picture is that they'll be the ones to remind him that while yes his students are important he needs to take care of himself just as he's been telling his students to do. I do have plans for him as well.

...

ONTO THE STORY ~

It was about thirty minutes later that Ino finally got up from her seat next to Sakura, stretching. "I should probably go ahead and meet back up with Shikamaru, but you have to promise me you'll get some sleep tonight, Sakura. You really look exhausted...!"

"Right, I'll try to. Thanks, Ino…" Sakura smiled a bit.

"Don't mention it." Ino waved a hand, returning the gesture, before she gave a concerned look. "Just take care of yourself. And if you need anything, always feel free to ask, alright?"

Everybody keeps telling me that, but I feel so lost...

"Okay…" Sakura nodded weakly, before Ino went back to visit Chouji, leaving her to herself.

Still, after talking to Ino, I think I feel a little better now...

When it came down to it, Ino was really kind and always looking out for her friends. It was one of the things that had drawn her to her back in her childhood.

Although she would never say it aloud, Sakura was pretty sure that if she'd never met Ino, she might not even be a ninja right now. Ino was the one who inspired her, the one she'd idolized all these years and wanted to be like. She was beautiful, smart, and confident, everything Sakura herself *wanted* to be.

Come to think of it, that was sort of what had drawn her to Sasuke too.

To her, who wasn't from any special clan unlike the majority of her classmates, He was awesome, agile - a stereotypical top student who was everything *she wasn't.*

But now, although she still looked up to him, it wasn't just Sasuke or Ino anymore. Instead, she was starting to see that there were so many people out there with skills and abilities beyond her imagination. A lot of them almost her own age, in fact.

Whether it be Lee(who was currently still in rehabilitation), Shikamaru, Hinata, or numerous others who'd shown protentional she never would have believed was possible upon first becoming a genin. She was beginning to feel completely outmatched by the world around her. She'd barely managed in fights like with The Otonin, did absolutely nothing except guard Tazuna during The Wave Mission, and when the village was attacked in the Chuunin exams, the most she could do was delay Gaara from attacking Sasuke by some fluke, after which she was completely knocked unconscious.

It really *frustrated* her, and that was only putting it *lightly*.

And then there was Naruto... He was improving more and more each day! It was almost like every time she turned around he already had a new jutsu to show off, defeating enemies right and left, while she, on the other hand, felt like nothing in *comparison*. He was *amazing*.

Guilt once again weighed on her chest as she thought back to how he'd got hurt protecting her.

Weak. Useless. You're just a burden to everybody around you. You're always holding them back. You'll never be good enough. Stupid. Stupid.

These were things she occasionally said to herself on a regular basis, but suddenly the voice was back, replaying over and over in her head like a mantra, criticizing her for every little mistake she'd made in her entire life.

She didn't know if it was her mother talking or if it was her talking, but she didn't care anymore because it was true. Sure, she'd asked to be Tsunade's apprentice, and Tsunade agreed to it, but the doubts bugged her again.

Was it the right choice?

Would she be able to handle it?

Would it do her any good?

Wouldn't she just be holding her back like she'd been holding everybody else back?

No. She couldn't think about these things.

Sakura internally scolded herself. She'd told herself that she would get stronger, no matter what anybody else may say. She refused to go back on her resolve. And her thought process just now had made it abundantly clear to her exactly *why*.

Never again, She never wanted anybody else to have to get hurt on her account ever again.

So she couldn't keep wallowing in her self-pity or nothing would ever change.

And Ino was right, she also needed to tell somebody about Naruto or that wouldn't change either.

...

Iruka had grabbed a chair and was now sitting beside Naruto's stretcher as Kakashi caught him up on everything relevant that had happened over the past week.

Iruka kept sparing occasional glances to Naruto, who seemed to keep avoiding his gaze. No doubt the boy was still feeling shame and frustration at causing everybody so much worry, especially Iruka. But Iruka himself knew that expression better than anybody else. A part of Naruto still resented having been found out and didn't like being in this situation.

But, really, who could blame him for that?

"Um, Uzumaki-san? My name is Doctor Kamaji. I'd like to ask you a few questions if that's alright with you?" A middle aged man with a mustache walked in.

Kakashi subconsciously prepared for Naruto to start mouthing off the doctor, but sighed in relief at Naruto's response.

"Uh, sure, I guess." Naruto had thought it over for a second before responding.

Kakashi found this to be very reassuring. Earlier, Naruto had flat out refused to even *speak* to any nurses or doctors at all, let alone answer their questions, so at least they appeared to be making *some* progress.

"Well, first off, do you mind telling me what brings you in today?" Kamaji inquired.

"...Shouldn't that already be on your record or something..." Naruto muttered. Despite how aware he and everybody else was of it, he didn't like being asked to say that he had been hurting himself. Least of all to some guy he just met.

Much to the concern of Iruka and Kakashi, Naruto immediately appeared to be becoming flustered by being asked to talk about it.

"Well, it *is*, but I want to hear it from *you*." Kamaji probed, pretending to not notice the scratch marks on Naruto's arm.

At hearing that, Naruto grew silent, debating if he should speak or not, what he should say.

"...Naruto, remember what we talked about." Iruka smiled softly, placing a hand over his arm to tell him it would be okay. "You don't have to say anything you're not comfortable with, but at least try to put a name to this. That's all we're asking of you."

Admitting he had a problem was a better start than nothing.

Naruto met his eyes momentarily as he considered Iruka's words before looking down at the scratches on his arm.

A name, huh?

"...About a week ago, Kakashi-sensei found out that I was hurting myself, so Tsunade-obaa-chan sent me here cuz she thinks it'll help me somehow..." Naruto finally said in a low voice. It still wasn't comfortable to say and to be honest, if Iruka or Kakashi hadn't been there, he knew he wouldn't have told him anything.

"Hokage-sama sent you here?" Kamaji inquired, without questioning the exact details of Naruto's ties with the Fifth Hokage for him to be so informal.

"Yeah..." Naruto nodded his confirmation. "She healed my injuries before I got here though, so these were from a short while ago..."

"I see..." Kamaji mused, scrawling something onto the papers in his clipboard. "Are you in any pain right now?"

"Not really."

"Can you tell me how long this has been going on for?"

Naruto once again had to hesitate for a moment on that one. That was hard to answer. It was true that he'd actually only started cutting himself a couple months ago, give or take, but before that, he would occasionally take to punching walls, trees and mirrors to relieve stress and draw blood, which could easily be chalked up to a training accident if anybody asked. Did that count? He supposed it *could*...

"...Well, it wasn't really something that happened much before, at least not that I was aware of. But lately... The urges keep getting stronger, like it's all I can think about, y'know?" He finally said, trying his best to ignore everybody's gazes.

"Was there... any kind of recent trigger that made them worse...?" Kamaji wanted to know.

"...No, none that I can think of, it just sort of happened one day." Naruto said vaguely, immediately apposed to the direction this conversation was going. There had in fact been something that happened when the cutting actually started, but, as he'd told himself over and over again, none of them needed to know that.

Unknown to him, everybody in the room could tell that he was holding something back, but decided not to press him on it.

"At this current moment, are you having any thoughts about hurting yourself or anybody else?" Kamaji asked.

"...Just myself..." Naruto murmured in a barely audible voice. Earlier, he would have flat out said no, but he felt he at least owed Kakashi and Iruka somewhat of an honest answer after all the worry he'd caused them. Besides... He'd made a promise to Iruka to say when he felt like hurting himself, and he wasn't one to go back on his word over something like that.

"On a scale of one to ten, can you tell me how bad the urges are?"

"...It actually just went up to a ten." Naruto sunk in on himself in response. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and his breathing was becoming uneven.

If not for Iruka moving over to gently but firmly hold onto his arm, keeping him grounded, he was absolutely certain he would have already dug his nails into his wrist by now.

At the moment, all he wanted to do was make himself bleed, to make himself feel pain, and shut out the overwhelming emotions he was feeling.

All he *needed* to do right now was escape.

Stop with the questions already.

Just mind your own damn business.

I can't take this anymore...!

An irrational voice in the back of his head kept wanting to shout these things at the doctor who was only trying to do his job.

The doctor scribbled down something else onto his papers before he went to typical questions, mainly about if he was on any drugs, medication, whether or not Naruto had ever had any surgeries before, etcetera etcetera.

Kamaji then got up and stood in front of Naruto.

"I'm going to push on your stomach, can you tell me if it hurts here?" He asked, reaching out near Naruto's pelvis.

Despite his bad mood, Naruto couldn't help but laugh when Kamaji pressed his hand up to his waist line. Iruka and Kakashi smirked a bit at the sight. It was well known that Naruto was one of the most ticklish people out there.

"No pain?"

"No, it's mostly just ticklish." Naruto choked out in laughter again, before the doctor pulled away(after looking into his ears and throat and listening to his heart beat, blood pressure and pulse, of course).

"I have one other question and then I'll get out of your hair, alright?" Kamaji smiled lightly. "Are you by any chance sexually active?"

That's where Naruto looked away. The hesitation was clear for every party in the room, and while his body language wasn't intense enough to alarm them, it did leave them with questions.

"...Naruto?" Iruka urged him to answer the doctor. Last he knew Naruto didn't even have a girlfriend. Sure, he liked Sakura, but she was in love with Sasuke, wasn't she? So who else

could have been with him? Being embarrassed about a relationship, especially at his age, wasn't that surprising, but even so... something about it just didn't feel right to him.

Kakashi felt the same. He'd been around Naruto enough recently to know that he had never mentioned anything about being with anybody. Furthermore, he was obviously still into Sakura, but surely there couldn't be anything going on between them, right? For one, they were just kids, but secondly, even if Sakura had been growing closer to Naruto, she still liked Sasuke, so it *couldn't* be her.

But then *who*...?

Well, it wasn't like it mattered. That kind of thing was Naruto's business and if he didn't want to tell anybody then that was his prerogative. Still...

Something was clearly off about it, and both Iruka and Kakashi momentarily exchanged glances, but without any proof to back up their suspicions, it was just baseless conjecture, and nobody could press him on it.

"H-Huh?" Naruto gazed up at hearing Iruka's voice, before giving a lop sided smile, awkwardly scratching the back of his head. "Oh, sorry about that, I guess I got kind of distracted there for a second, ha-ha... Anyway, there's nothing going on."

"I see. Thank you for answering my questions, Uzumaki-san. If everything goes well, we're hoping to allow regular visitation starting tomorrow morning. How does that sound?"

"Really? You mean I'll be finally able to see Sakura-chan again?" Naruto quickly cheered up at hearing that, his previous bad mood completely sapped. Heck, even being able to see *Sasuke's sour face* would be better than having to glare at four white walls all day.

"Yeah, anybody you like. But before then, you should rest some. And if you need anything, there will always nurses around on the staff who will be more than willing to help you." Kamaji smiled.

"Okay. Thanks, doc." Naruto nodded back. In the past, he had had really bad experiences at the hospital before, and sometimes, nurses weren't all that friendly to him, but this guy, he actually kind of seemed okay, even if he did seem a little intrusive.

"Hey, I'm just doing my job. Anyway, I'll be taking my leave now." Kamaji politely made his exit after that, leaving Naruto alone with the two teachers.

"Oh, I forgot to mention that Sakura and Sasuke were actually out in the waiting room when I came here." Iruka suddenly said, catching Naruto's attention. "They were really worried about you, Naruto. I don't think I've ever seen Sasuke that desperate before. And Sakura looked like she hasn't eaten anything all day."

Even though Sakura said she ate, it was pretty apparent by her complexion that she was famished and if she had eaten something as she claimed, it wasn't much of anything at all.

Naruto already knew that they had been concerned about him, Sasuke made it all too obvious by checking his arms every night over the past few days, let alone the *rest* of his team's concern. But the last part of what Iruka said caught his ear and he considered his words for a second, his mind going off into an entirely different direction. "Huh? What do you mean Sakura-chan hasn't eaten? I could have sworn she got a plate of food this morning..."

He looked to Kakashi to inquire his thoughts or statement on the matter.

"Well, Sakura *did* say she was on some kind of diet..." Kakashi mused aloud.

"A *diet*? At her age?" Iruka seemed a bit surprised, turning to look at him. Sakura had always seemed kind of thin, but he'd never really thought much of it before.

"It's not that strange, is it?" Kakashi raised an eyebrow at his reaction. Her diet had seemed kind of odd to him as well, but he was no expert on dieting or nutrition to say for certain if it was healthy.

"No, it's *just*..." Iruka mused, remembering how pale Sakura had looked earlier. If that was the result of dieting then surely it couldn't be good. "Maybe you should get some advice from a doctor on the matter, because she really didn't look good earlier."

Also... While it was true that he was by no means an expert about it, since he was really just there to teach kids the basics and fundamentals of becoming a shinobi, he *had* met and taught kids who just so happened to have eating disorders, and he could easily say that it was one of the worst things any Shinobi could struggle with especially if they went into the battlefield. If one wasn't taking proper care of their body, they could end up passing out from dehydration and hunger or worse.

Needless to say, there were numerous reasons why issues like that needed to be tackled before it got out of hand.

Kakashi considered his suggestion, but before he could speak up his thoughts were cut off.

"I just don't get it..." Naruto said, frustrated, catching the attention of both Iruka and Kakashi.

"Don't get what? What's wrong, Naruto?" Iruka asked, glancing back over at him.

That's when the realization hit Naruto like bricks, why she'd started offering him her meals, whether it be only part of it or all of it. Why she had got so upset when he mentioned her fixation on sweets to tease her. And, most importantly, why she had seemed to barely want to touch food after eating on the first night of their mission. "Why does Sakura-chan want to lose weight so badly? She's just fine the way she is, isn't she...? She's the prettiest girl I know!"

"That's the second time you've said that about her." Kakashi noted, causing Naruto to blush a bit at being called out.

"Huh? H-hey, I didn't mean it like that! I just... I can't stand to see her hate herself. It really frustrates me..." Naruto looked back down sheepishly.

Despite his denial, however, it was all too obvious. There was no doubt Naruto was concerned for Sakura, but there was more to his repetitive praise for her than just that.

"Sakura *has* always been the most self-conscious of you three, but..." Kakashi thought about it for a second before Iruka gave a suggestion of his own.

"You think it's possible that something else could be bothering her? Aside from the stuff with Naruto, I mean." Iruka questioned, catching Naruto's eye at the suggestion.

"It is likely. In any case, I'm actually about to go out and talk with her myself, so try not to worry too much about it, alright, Naruto...? I'm sure Sakura will be just fine." Kakashi said, as he got up. He too had been rather concerned by Sakura's so called "diet" and quite obvious insomnia, not to mention Sasuke's nightmares and less apparent avoidance of food as well, but hadn't really spoke about any of it with them due to his attention being sapped by Naruto's issues, but now that Naruto had somebody trustworthy looking after him in the meantime, he could finally take some time to focus on his other students' situations too.

"O-okay. Thanks, Kakashi-sensei." Naruto smiled softly, receiving a pat on the head from his teacher.

He turned to look at Iruka. "You two *will* be fine here by yourselves, right?"

"Of course..." Iruka nodded, smiling lightly.

"Yeah, just go on already." Naruto grinned.

"Well, if you say so." Kakashi sighed, before leaving Naruto in Iruka's care.

...

Sakura couldn't help but find herself a bit concerned when Sasuke still hadn't returned yet.

She supposed it wasn't like this kind of thing was particularly odd or anything as of late, coming from him. In fact, outside of missions, it had kind of started to become the *norm*.

Sasuke taking off and vanishing for several hours or days, next to nobody even knowing where he was...

It was times like this that she once again found her mind wandering, despite herself.

"I left him with a parting gift... Eventually, Sasuke-kun will be forced to seek me out... In the quest for power."

The strange mark on Sasuke's neck, left by Orochimaru, which had not only interfered with his Sharingan and Chakra, but also caused him to break that Oto-nin Zaku's arm in revenge for Zaku hurting her.

Sasuke's brother Itachi, who massacred his clan...

"This is my burden to bear, alone."

"It's my decision and it's none of your business."

She bit her lip, gripping at the fabric of her dress.

Had something happened? Was that why he hadn't come back? Where was he?

"Mind if I sit here?"

Startled, Sakura looked up at hearing Kakashi's voice.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Sakura perked up a bit. "How is Naruto? Are they going to let visitors back to see him yet?"

"No, not until tomorrow morning." Kakashi shook his head, feeling a bit bad when Sakura's shoulders slumped. He quickly knew he had to say something to cheer her up. "But Naruto's doing just fine, he seems to be feeling better, at least. Plus. I'll even let you in on a little secret."

"Well, that's good." Sakura sighed in relief at hearing that before raising an eyebrow. "Wait, a secret?"

Kakashi smiled with his one visible eye now that he had her attention. "Naruto said he's really looking forward to seeing you tomorrow."

At hearing that, she was immediately caught off guard, feeling her face heat up.

"Huh? M-me? Well, I mean it *is* a *hospital*. Of course he's looking forward to having visitors. Even Sasuke-kun visiting him would be enjoyable to Naruto in a situation like that." Sakura rationalized, but still couldn't help but blush a bit at hearing his words. What was the point of telling her something weird like that? Was it weird?

In truth, she actually found it flattering that Naruto found her presence so reassuring, but there wasn't anything special about it, right?

Right, Naruto was that kind of guy who was touched by basically anything.

That had to be all there was to it.

Still, if she knew that was the case, why was her heart beating as fast as it was? Stupid Sensei, he just had to have the worst timing and made something seem weird when it wasn't.

Kakashi narrowed his eye, seeing through her act, a bit taken aback by the fact that she was suddenly blushing, but suddenly remembered something. "Ah, that reminds me... Where is he Sasuke? I didn't see him when I came out here."

"I'm not sure... He walked off earlier and said there was something he needed to take care of. But he hasn't come back since." Sakura told him, with a worried expression.

"I see..." Kakashi pondered it. Although he was a bit concerned at first, he decided he could just talk to Sasuke later. "Well, I guess it's fine. There's something I wanted to talk with you

about anyway."

"Oh, sure. What is it?" Sakura wanted to know.

"..." Kakashi hesitated wondering if it was a good idea to talk about Sakura about such a touchy subject. If his suspicions were off base, the line of questioning could even come off as harassment which was the last thing he wanted. Still, the question had to be asked. "I need you to be completely honest with me... When was the last time you ate anything?"

Sakura immediately looked away, confirming that everybody else's questions were not unfounded.

"...I just ate this morning, why do you ask...?" Sakura said in a hesitant voice, telling him the same thing she'd told Iruka.

It's just as I thought... She's even worse at lying than Naruto is...

Kakashi felt his eyebrow furrow grimly.

"Sakura... it's not really my place to get involved in this sort of thing, but, as your teacher, I do bare the responsibility of making sure you're taking care of yourself, so I would prefer it if you didn't lie to me." Kakashi said softly, trying to reason with the girl, who seemed to tense up out of guilt for being called out. He rested a hand on her shoulder as a means to reassure her. "Don't worry, I'm not going to get mad at you, I just want you to know that you can trust me... If there's something bothering you, you can always come talk to me..."

Sakura then looked up at him, considering his words. Ino basically said the same thing to her.

For a moment, a part of her almost wanted to tell him the truth, because, logically, she knew that the lengths she'd been going under the premise of a diet wasn't normal for anybody, but what if he told somebody else and it got back to her parents?

She would never hear the end of it from her mother.

For one, Mibuki would just claim she was trying to embarrass her and cause trouble for her, as she *always* did, that she was "creating drama over nothing".

Once again, she was sure it would be just like when she was being teased in the academy by Ami and her friends.

Mibuki and Kizashi had done absolutely *nothing at all* to stop it, even going as far as to laugh it off as her just being "oversensitive". At some point, Mibuki just got tired of hearing about it all together, invalidating and fussing at her to make Sakura feel completely invisible to everybody around her.

Maybe that was when she first realized she couldn't trust them. Not just that, but it seemed like every single time she had a concern or needed somebody to talk to, they always shot her feelings down like they didn't matter, like she didn't know what she was talking about. They didn't understand her at all.

And despite how much her mother frustrated her, it really hurt down deep, because they were her *parents*. She was supposed to be able to rely on them for advice and support, but she couldn't even have that much when it came to them.

They couldn't know about this. She couldn't risk it.

But, even so, Sakura wasn't an idiot. She also knew Kakashi wouldn't buy it if she said she'd already eaten again. That wouldn't work on him, and he'd probably just end up even more *suspicious*. So she had to come up with something believable that wasn't too obvious.

"...I um..." Sakura avoided his gaze. "Well, I really *have* been eating, or at least *trying* to, but I just... I keep getting sick, so I can't stomach anything without throwing it up..."

It wasn't *entirely* a lie. She really *did* get sick when she ate, and she really *did* usually end up throwing it up.

Kakashi, after a moment of internal debate, seemed believe her. And although he did feel some relief at the idea that maybe she wasn't *intentionally* starving herself, it was still concerning to him. Whether it be intentional or not, the fact remained that Sakura was malnourished.

"...If that's the case, why didn't you say anything...? I'm sure we could have talked it over with Tsunade-sama and she could have given you some suggestions about your diet... What if you passed out on a mission? What would you do then?" Kakashi said.

"...I didn't want to worry you. You already have problems going on with Naruto and Sasuke-kun, anyway. I'd just be causing you unnecessary trouble by getting you involved..." Sakura smiled shakily.

"Sakura, you're my *student*." Kakashi immediately insisted. "These kinds of things are important to me. And regardless of what anybody else may say, you will *never* be a burden to me. Now will you please tell me who could have *possibly* made you feel this way...?"

"...I always feel this way..." Sakura let the statement slip out without thinking, feeling a sense of panic that it was gonna be perceived as rude. "Oh, um, I mean... I just... I..."

She stumbled over her words trying to think of a way to explain herself. but before she could, Kakashi stroked the top of her head, cutting her off.

"It's okay. There's no need to explain yourself. It just means we have some work to do, right?" He smiled a bit.

"Mn..." Sakura uttered, feeling herself slump, before looking up at him. "Alright, but you have to promise me you won't my parents about this, Kakashi-sensei. Please, they can't know anything about this."

Kakashi rose an eyebrow, but figured it was a normal request in the end. *Most* kids didn't want to get their parents involved in their issues, and Sakura hadn't even wanted to get *him* involved in it so it wasn't really a surprise to him.

"Alright, but in the meantime, I want you to continue trying to eat even if it's only a little bit, alright? If this keeps up, I'm going to have to ask that you talk with Hokage-sama about this, because this isn't normal."

"I know... I'm really sorry..." Sakura murmured, feeling guilty.

"Don't apologize. It isn't your fault..." Kakashi shook his head. Despite that, a part of him still wanted to ask Tsunade about it. Because the idea of Sakura passing out from hunger, even at her home just really bothered him.

And Sakura wholeheartedly begged to differ with his statement. If only he knew.

But he didn't *need* to.

However... There was something he *did* need to know. "Kakashi-sensei...?"

"Hm?" Kakashi glanced down inquisitively at her.

"There's something I need to talk with you and Hokage-sama about..." Sakura avoided his gaze. "It's about Naruto."

Kakashi didn't even have to ask, because he could already tell just by the tone in her voice that whatever it was was serious.

"Do you want to-" He started to ask, but right as he was speaking, he was cut off by the sound of a window shattering and some ear shattering screams, as well as what almost sounded like a thousand birds.

"Don't *ever* speak Itachi's name in front of me again, or I'll make you regret it, you bastard!" An enraged voice shouted.

Oh boy.

Kakashi already knew who before even getting up.

"That sounded like Sasuke-kun...!" Sakura looked up at Kakashi in alarm before she and Kakashi followed the sound of the commotion.

When they rounded a couple corners, they saw numerous nurses and a doctor standing around, before their focus was drawn to Sasuke, who was currently pinning an older boy probably around the age of 18 to the ground. The entire window behind him was shattered, glass shards lying on the floor around him. Lightning surrounding his hand, he just barely seemed to be holding himself back from finishing him off.

But that wasn't all.

Not only was Sasuke's Sharingan activated, but his cursemark was as well, spreading around his neck and up the right side of his face. Whatever had transpired between Sasuke and the boy beneath him or whatever was said to Sasuke must have been bad enough to set him off and since it had clearly been about Itachi, it wasn't really that shocking. Saying anything

about Itachi or the Uchiha clan could be enough to set Sasuke off, especially lately, with how his irrational emotional state had been.

"Sasuke, you have to let him go." Kakashi said sternly approaching him. He didn't want to restrain Sasuke, but he would do so or even knock him out, if he had to.

"Stay back...!" Sasuke glared at him, threateningly.

"Sasuke-kun, please, try to calm down...!" Sakura pled, throwing Sasuke off guard.

"Sakura...?" He froze, before looked over at his teammate, feeling a pang of guilt when he saw the pained expression on her face, the tears welling up in her eyes.

"Whatever happened, I'm sure we can talk about it, so please, you don't have to do this..." She said in a choked up voice.

Shit.

Sasuke mentally cursed himself, looking down at the panicked expression on the boy's face.

This was just like in the forest of death. Yet again, he had let his emotions get the better of him. Yet again, he had let the cursemark control him.

Yet again...

"Please..." Sakura said again, as Sasuke met her eyes.

He had made her worry about him.

"Foolish little brother... You don't have enough... Hatred..."

"Damn it...!"

Despite himself, he avoided hitting the boy, instead blasting a hole into the ground beneath him. He then felt his Chidori fade, as he fell to his knees, losing his initial resolve. The cursemark retracted and his Sharingan turned back to black.

He couldn't do it.

Not in front of *her*.

Not again...

No matter how much the guy had pissed him off for speaking about things he didn't have the slightest clue about, he could never let Sakura see that side of him again.

He absentmindedly looked down at the shards of glass from the window embedded in his arm, gritting his teeth as he made no move to stop the boy from leaving.

"*Maa*, sorry about that, everyone..." Kakashi said, nervously, scratching the back of his head, all too aware of the sedative in one of the doctor's hands. He didn't by any means approve of

the damage Sasuke had done to the hospital window or the floor but, at the very least Sasuke had managed to once retract the cursemark before he seriously hurt somebody and for that alone he couldn't be prouder of him.

"Can you stand?" Kakashi asked softly, kneeling down beside him.

"...Yeah..." Sasuke murmured in a low voice, but made no move to get up.

"Come on... Let's get you cleaned up." Sakura smiled softly, holding out a hand, and lifting him to his feet. Sasuke silently complied, following in tow.

Neither one of them knew what had set him off but that conversation would have to wait. Right now, they just needed to focus on getting the glass shards out of his skin and his arm bandaged up.

...

A/N: Wow I hope that's fine. I had originally wanted to make this longer, the the ordering of events was also far different before and and I'm still struggling with the next scenes so I feel leaving it off here should be fine. A lot of the stuff and dialogue was based off personal experiences, so yeah. Also as I've clarified, this will be NaruSaku, but since it's also Team 7, I felt like the last scene of this chapter is necessary because I wanted to show that not only is Sasuke starting to rely on his teammates again, but I feel like Sakura is kind of a soft spot for Sasuke if I consider scenes like where Sasuke broke Zaku's arms and almost went for Dosu, but it was Sakura who stopped him and eased that darkness in his heart. Even if we're not going for romantic, Sakura will always be one of the most important people to Sasuke and somebody he sees as family and I wanted to show case that. As for what the boy said about Itachi, that'll have to wait to be revealed but I do have plans. :D

Anyway, I'd love to hear your thoughts, guys. XD;;;

Chapter 19

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 19

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

I'd like to thank my friends on Instagram for helping me with this one. uwu

FINALLY REACHING REAL PLOT IN THIS CHAPTER SORTA? IT MAY FEEL LIKE I'M RUSHING THINGS BUT I HAD TO DO THIS BECAUSE I HAVE PLANS AND BECAUSE AGAIN SASUKE'S STORY LINE IS GONNA BE VASTLY DIFFERENT FOR THIS STORY SAKE WHILE STILL KEEPING THE HEART OF HIS CHARACTER THE SAME!

Note: So some of y'all have been wondering what pairing I've been planning for Sasuke. If you have any suggestions please lemme know.

The pairings I'm certain on at this point is NarutoxSakura, KibaxHinata, NejixTenten, TsunadexJiraiya, SuigetsuxKarin if I go into that(because 1. I'm not really a fan of SK for one(no hate to the shippers), but also this is a canon divergent story and therefore the storyline is going to be vastly different and Karin and Sasuke won't be on the same team, but 2. I just think SuiKarin could be super cute if I bring them in, so yeah.), and ShikamaruxTemari.

As for Sasuke, the suggestions I've received is Ino, Tamaki and some random civilian girl.

I could still go with SaiXIno but I still think SasuIno could be kinda cute. But I'm also not really focused much on pairings with Sasuke at the moment, cuz he has a lot of other things he needs to work out currently, like with his brother, so yeah. I'm more or less gonna wait this one out and hear y'all's thoughts on it.

Because even if he doesn't end up with anybody, I do have other plans that could work out too(although they might leave some people feeling very sad, but hey that's the joys of fanfiction, right?)

Nextly, somebody thought the scene at the end of the last chapter felt more like SasuSaku than NaruSaku but for the sake of this story, I'm actually wanting to develop Sakura and Sasuke's bond into more of a sister-brother type thing. It's not something I see much in fanfictions, but I think it'd be really interesting to explore since Naruto likewise was meant to be favor a brother figure to Sasuke, and it will also play into later scenes I have planned and some things I've already shown. Sakura will always be kind of like that soft spot for Sasuke and as I was writing the last chapter, I was actually thinking a bit of that scene where the other Uchiha members accused Itachi of killing Shisui, and before things got out of hand, it was Sasuke who cried for Itachi to stop and Itachi caved, apologizing. So yeah, while it might have SEEMED like SasuSaku, that wasn't the intentions behind it.

I just wanted to show that Sasuke is slowly starting to open himself up more, and show the clear obstacles he's having to face, especially since this story isn't just NaruSaku but focuses on the entirety of Team 7 as well. But, that aside, I do understand why y'all got that impression.

...

ONTO THE STORY~

As the nurses were working on getting the glass shards out of Sasuke's hand, nobody said anything. Both Sakura and Sasuke were avoiding eye-contact as Kakashi waited patiently for Sasuke to explain himself. As he should have expected, the boy stayed stubbornly silent, until she was gone and his arm was bandaged up.

Some time after that, he spoke, breaking the suffocating silence.

"...Sorry..., Sakura..." Yet again, he found himself apologizing, hating that she had had to see him like that.

Just like the week before, Sakura didn't know what to think, but moved to stop him as he started to get up.

"...You're damn right you should be apologizing, *Shannaro yo*..." She lightly scolded him. Normally, she wouldn't have, but the fact that he had shattered their window and damaged his arm like that, even going as far as to threaten somebody's life... It was just too much. "What in the world were you even thinking back there? It's like you completely snapped."

Sasuke seemed to tense a bit a hearing that, but after another moment of silence, he spoke again, not giving her much of an answer at all, keeping his feelings to himself. "...It's nothing."

Kakashi sighed at his reluctance to talk(typical Sasuke), deciding to take initiative. "...That didn't look like nothing to *me*. Now why don't you tell us what *really* happened...?"

"...I said it's not important." Sasuke clenched his fists.

"So you're Sasuke-kun, right? The younger brother of Uchiha Itachi..." The boy mused, meeting his eyes. "You sure do favor him, I'll give you that much."

"What do you want?" Sasuke immediately glared at him. " And who are you?"

"I'm glad you asked. You can just call me Senko." The boy smirked. One thing was for certain right off the bat. Sasuke didn't like this guy, at all. "I wanted to talk with you about Itachi."

"I'm not interested." Sasuke immediately shot him down. He had no interest in having a conversation about his brother whatsoever.

"Oh, so the rumors are *true then. Bring up Itachi, and you completely lose it. Interesting." Senko seemed to be enjoying this, much to Sasuke's annoyance. "I can't really say I blame you. After losing everything in a single night like that? Who* wouldn't *be angry? But haven't*

you ever wondered, just once, if your feelings were misplaced or if there was more to the situation than met the eye?"

"Just what are you implying*?" Sasuke questioned, dangerously.*

"Oh, nothing much. Just that maybe you don't really know your brother as well as you think you do." Senko shrugged.

*"**Bullshit.*** You're *the one who doesn't know anything about him...! I* **saw** *the true Itachi with my own two eyes when that **psychopath** murdered our entire clan...!" Sasuke growled, feeling his blood boiling and his fingers twitching.*

"Oh, scary." Senko smirked, as if he wasn't phased by his threats at all. "But answer me this. If Itachi was truly as evil and callous as everybody says he is, then why are you, his precious little brother, still alive...?"

Sasuke's eyes widened in response, as the realization sunk in.

"Come to think of it... Wasn't Itachi working for the Anbu at the time?" Senko pointed out and it was there that Sasuke's blood went cold. How did he know *that? "On top of that, there's also this rumor going around amongst the higher brass that he was a double agent, acting as the village's pipeline. Or in other words, what you might call a spy."*

"Wait, a spy*?" Sasuke quickly turned to face him, completely caught off guard by that. "That's impossible...!"*

"...Is it though?" Senko rose an eyebrow. "Can you really tell me that with absolute certainty...?"

"I...!" Sasuke started to argue back but was suddenly at a loss for words.

Suddenly, memories flashed back into his head of how Itachi had quickly began acting weirder than ever within months of joining the Anbu, more withdrawn, always leaving; Always telling him the same old "maybe next time" excuse when he asked him to help him with his training. Somehow or another, Itachi had changed, and everybody who knew him saw it.

Not only that, but Itachi never spoke of the details of his "missions" with Fugaku, and the majority of his life outside of the clan had become one giant question mark for Sasuke himself and many others.

Rumors at the time had even began to spread that Itachi was conspiring against them, which was exactly why he had been the suspect in Shisui's supposed suicide.

But there was no way it could have had anything to do with the massacre...!

Sasuke immediately wanted to throw up when he realized he was even questioning it.

"Well, I do admit it's only a rumor, so alas, I can't say for sure if it's true or not. But let's say it was..." Senko smiled, placing a finger on his lip. "Don't you think it's possible that they had

something to do with it? Maybe he was somehow coerced *into it... Just maybe... it wasn't even his idea to* begin *with... Who's to say...?"*

That was where Sasuke finally snapped, letting emotions get the better of him.

Just who the hell was that boy and how did he know so much? What was even his *gain* in telling him all that? Questions, one after another, flooded into his head.

It was then that he realized it. It wasn't just sheer ignorance. No, Sasuke was absolutely *certain* the boy had been testing him, just *trying* to get a reaction out of him.

And to even suggest the *Anbu* had something to do with the massacre was just beyond preposterous.

Itachi was a *criminal*. A *murderer*. A traitor to Konoha. Nothing more, nothing less.

Above all else, he was the person who took *everything* from him, the one who killed everybody he loved.

The person he had devoted his entire *life* to killing. Because if not for that, then why was he even still alive? What was the purpose in living if not for revenge?

Outside of that, what did he even have left?

The boy was clearly just out of his mind.

"Sasuke, you need to breathe. You're having a panic attack." Kakashi's voice called out to him, but he ignored it.

A thousand different voices were echoing in his head at the moment, ranging from Itachi's to Orochimaru's to Kakashi's to Naruto's and Sakura's to the screaming voices of his clan members and then even Tsunade's and others, and all he could see was red, his mother and father lying on the floor dead in front of him.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" He found himself gasping for air, utterly refusing to cooperate with anybody.

He heard voices but they were muffled, his vision was becoming dark and fuzzy.

He just wanted everything to stop.

He couldn't think.

He needed to think.

Even after a doctor's needle was stuck into his arm and he was sent into unconsciousness, he still refused to believe what the boy had suggested.

...

Kakashi sighed as he looked down at the sleeping form of his student. He wasn't normally the type to approve of such drastic measures, but the way Sasuke had been acting just now, even lashing out at the doctors who were trying to help him. He couldn't very well let it slide.

If it wasn't one problem, it was the next...

"Any idea how long he'll be passed out? I'd really like to ask him some questions when I can." He asked one of the nurses.

"Well, the effects of the sedative could last up to an hour. My suggestion is to wait it out a bit."

"I see. Thank you." Kakashi said. "Oh, that reminds me. Sakura, wasn't there something you wanted to talk with me and Tsunade-sama about?"

"Oh, yeah! That's right...!" Sakura looked up at him, alarmed. "It was something about the villagers..."

...

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Come in."

Sakura had insisted that the matter couldn't wait, so Kakashi brought her back to the Hokage's office to let her speak, since Tsunade probably wouldn't have been able to make it out to the hospital until at least nightfall.

Shizune was standing by Tsunade's side at her desk, helping her sort through some documents.

"Oh, it's you two. What's going on?" Tsunade looked up from the overwhelming stack of papers in front of her.

"Well, it's about Naruto again... Sakura here said she needed to speak with you..." Kakashi told her.

"I see. Shizune, can you take those into the storage room and sort them there?" Tsunade asked.

"Huh? Tsunade-sama, you can't expect me to do all of this by myself, can you?" Shizune dared to ask.

"That's exactly what I'm expecting you to do!" Tsunade scolded her, causing her to jump. "Now get to it!"

Shizune immediately shrieked and jumped into action, wondering just what in the world had been up with Tsunade today. It wasn't like she wasn't normally a slave driver, but ever since Team 7 returned from their mission, Naruto had been sent to the hospital and something was really off with Tsunade's mood. Just what in the world was going on...? Shizune decided

against questioning it for the time being, figuring whatever it was must be serious, and instead left, doing as Tsunade had asked her to.

"Sorry about that." Tsunade sighed. "Now, Sakura, can you tell me what it is that you wanted to talk about? Is there something you haven't told us?"

"...Um..." Sakura hesitated, once again questioning if this was the right choice, but when Kakashi placed a hand on her shoulder and uttered the words *"It's okay..."*, she remembered what Ino had told her, forcing herself to regain her composure. This was for Naruto. "Remember how we mentioned that Juro was selling girls and women for sexual labor? Well..., Naruto... He was acting really strange that day, so after we boarded that ship, I actually tried to ask him if something was bothering him, and..."

"So what did he say...?" Tsunade asked.

Sakura reached up to clutch her arm with uncertainty. "Well, um... He didn't say a lot, but he mentioned the villagers... He implied that sometimes they..."

After a moment, Tsunade felt her entire being go freeze when the implication struck her.

No. God no.

He was just a child, for God's sake. A twelve year old *child*.

How the hell could *anybody think to*-?

Within seconds, numerous terrifying images plagued her mind and just barely she fought back the urge to smash out her window.

Kakashi, meanwhile, was beside himself. He couldn't even speak at first.

"*Sexual abuse*? Do you really think that's possible...?" Tsunade bit her lip, dreadfully taking the liberties for him. Numerous probabilities had come to mind, when considering what Naruto could have been hiding, but none of them wanted to believe it was something like *this*.

To think they would stood so low as to do something like that to a child, it was just

unbelievable

And yet, so *obvious.*

A grim expression settled on Kakashi's face as all the pieces fell into place. Suddenly, he felt nauseated.

This must be what he'd been so afraid to talk about, why he had hesitated earlier. And as much as he would rather deny it, something like *that would* be a perfectly understandable motivator for self-harming. To begin with, a child Naruto's age wouldn't *know* how to cope with such an experience as that, but secondly, they would try to hide it, whether it be out of shame or out of fear.

"...*Maa*... I'm afraid so..." He said dismally. "Earlier, in the hospital, the doctor actually asked Naruto if he was sexually active... I can only assume that's why he hesitated to say no..."

The fact that he'd failed to notice such a thing was happening to him filled him with a certain level of guilt, but his overwhelming desire to hurt the person responsible for even *daring* to lay a hand on his student was threatening to get the better of him and he had no idea how much longer he could keep himself in tact.

Nightmares, self-harm, excessive diets and now *this*? He wanted more than anything to just help his team, and to take their suffering away, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to, when he was on the verge of collapse himself.

Kakashi was no doubt exceptional at making out like everything was fine on the outside, but Tsunade herself had known him long enough to see that he was not in the state of mind to deal with this at the moment. She could see the rings under his eyes from having no sleep, she could see that he was trying his best to remain strong, but in reality he was falling apart.

"...This is bad." Tsunade sighed before looking back at Sakura, who had started clutching her shoulder after hearing what Kakashi said last. "Sakura, I need to know, did Naruto say anything else to you or mention the names of those villagers?"

"No, ma'am..." Sakura shook her head regretfully. "He wouldn't tell me anything beyond that. He hardly even spoke about it at all to begin with..."

"I should have figured as much..." Tsunade sighed, before she briefly bit down on her thumb nail, trying to decide where to go from there.

"Unfortunately, Naruto isn't the type to lash back at somebody as weak as a civilian, even if they *are* hurting him..." Kakashi said grimly. "They probably saw that kindness in him and took advantage of it..."

Why...? Why is it always Naruto and Sasuke-kun going through these things...? Sakura clenched her fists at the thought, feeling tears well up in her eyes. "Hokage-sama... You have the power to stop this from happening to him, don't you...? You have to do something for him... Please, I'm begging you..."

After hearing the girl's plea, Tsunade felt her heart break, and steadied her breathing the best she could, telling herself that she had to focus on what was right in front of her, not on what had happened in the past. This was about Naruto alone, nothing and nobody else. She was the *Fifth Hokage now*, *one of the Legendary Sannin, damn it!* She had to just suck it up.

"Don't worry, we *will*. I'm going out to the hospital later to speak with Iruka and Naruto to just see if I can get some answers from him, but I'm certain this will still take time, so I'm not expecting anything right away. In the mean time, I want the both of you to go home and get some rest. *Both* of you. Do I make myself clear?" Tsunade asked. As soon as she got her hands on the names of the people who even dared to such a thing to him, there was going to be *hell* to pay, and she'd personally see to it herself that they never saw the light of day again. Whether that be through death or behind bars, she didn't know yet, but she wasn't about let

them get away with this. Despite that, she knew she needed to calm down, remembering something else.

"And Sakura?" Tsunade looked down at the young Kunoichi in front of her who met her gaze. "I want you here at 3 PM sharp tomorrow."

"Huh? What for?" Sakura asked, confused for a moment.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten." Tsunade said, smirking a bit, catching Kakashi's attention. "We're going to start your training."

"Wait, you mean already?!" Sakura's jaw dropped a bit, nervously.

"You don't have a problem with it, do you?" Tsunade asked.

"N-no! Of course not!" Sakura insisted. "I just... I mean, you're the Hokage, right? I didn't think you would be free so soon, is all."

"Nonsense." Tsunade smiled. "It's really no problem at all."

She said that every single time when it came to them.

Sakura was starting to question if it was really just out of generosity or because she wanted any excuse to avoid work. Maybe it was both.

"Um... if I may..." Kakashi spoke up, awkward scratching the back of his head. "When was this apprenticeship arranged...? I'm not really upset. I just wasn't expecting this..."

"Oh, that's right...! I guess I didn't tell you about it..." Sakura realized apologetically. "Earlier, before I left, I asked Hokage-sama to make me her apprentice, and she agreed to it. And before you say it, I'm already aware that this isn't going to be easy, Kakashi-sensei, but, even so... I have to get stronger. I don't want to have to be protected anymore. Lee-san too, and everybody else, I just want to be able to help them the best I can, the same way they've helped me."

Kakashi was silent for a moment as considered her words. "Well, I was going to give you a lecture, but since you put it that way, I'd be a fool to say no, now *wouldn't* I...? I'm proud of you, Sakura. Just... Don't push yourself too far, alright...?"

It wasn't like he didn't have faith in Sakura, but he knew just how powerful the Sannin were, and how tough training under them could be. Despite that, he believed in her. She was not only smart, but persistent. She'd shown more affinity for perfect chakra control than either of her teammates from the beginning, and if anybody had what it took to become a medical ninja, it was Sakura.

Not only that, but Tsunade was a doctor and could help keep Sakura in check regarding her diet. In fact, he wouldn't even be surprised if she'd already noticed something was off.

"Right." Sakura said, smiling. "Thank you so much, Kakashi-sensei."

"Don't mention it." Kakashi gently stroked her on the head.

He would be lying if he said he wasn't the least bit disappointed by the fact that two of his students had been taken by the legendary Sannin now, but he figured it was probably for the best this way.

Well, as long as Sasuke didn't try to seek out Orochimaru or something, then everything would be absolutely fine.

It was after this that Tsunade dismissed them.

...

Lol um wow that was wow. I hope you all liked it...

I really hope y'all didn't mind the thing with Sasuke. I'm definitely not gonna have everything revealed at once, because Sasuke's arc is something that will probably end up taking years which will likely require a time skip same as the manga had, but I wanted to kick start SOMETHING for my Canon Divergence to truly work.

Anyway, I'll finally be able to start focusing a bit on Sasuke more now that I have something to work with. I hope y'all don't hate me for what I did lmfaoooo ;w;

Chapter 20

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 20

I'm sure y'all are wondering what's with all the updates, and I gotta say even I don't know hahaha! I'm finally back in school and won't be able to write again as much, so I've wanted to get in as much as I can!

Also somebody had questions about the sexual assault thing, and was worried if I plan to take it seriously, because things like that often never gets brought up in fanfiction, and when it does, it's over exaggerated and then just is forgotten part way through the story.

I want to start my response off by saying I entirely agree with that notion and concern! It really bugs me when authors bring in something like sexual assault or abuse and write it off as something that's just gone within days. I was actually sexually assaulted by a 40 year old man when I was 14/15, and he continued harassing me all the way to 21, and I blamed myself for so long over him and even now a certain part of me still feels responsible for "leading him on", and my grandmother even blamed me, which didn't help the situation at all(especially since my grandmother and mother aren't even on speaking terms anymore after that). I've had nightmares and ended up with PTSD because of him. So, as somebody who experienced this kind of thing first hand, I definitely don't plan on taking it lightly or writing it off as something that's just gone as a means to get two characters together or whatever. Because to me, it's not just unrealistic, but it's simplifying one of the worst traumas a person can have. I don't even think people understand how hard it can be for a person to truly be in a relationship after something like this. So even though this will be NaruSaku, I will also keep this into consideration as I'm writing their relationship, and base it majorly off of my own personal experiences.

Nextly, it's definitely true that there's not anything like this extreme in the manga(minus in chapter 1, there was a deleted scene with a riot of people insisting Naruto be killed(ignoring the third hokage's orders) after he stole the forbidden scroll, I can't imagine why it wasn't shown in the anime), but I kind of more or less started this as a vent thing, where each character has their own issues and stuff, where everything connects together. Issues like I'm bringing up don't just have an easy fix. They can take years to tackle and still not be completely gone, so yeah.

...

ONTO THE STORY~

...

Naruto hated hospitals. Well, to be fair, most people in their right mind didn't enjoy staying stuck in a room, staring at four white walls, for an extended period of time.

But for Naruto, it was detrimental and made him nothing short of anxious, allowing all the negative thoughts he ever dealt with on a day to day basis to flood his head.

His body begged for him to draw blood, to curb the itch, even if it was on his shoulder where nobody would see. It was better than nothing, right?

But he already knew that was off the table under Iruka's watchful eye. Even so... He did used to get one by him all the time at the academy. Maybe he could pull something off? Just say he had to go to the bathroom!

He needed this.

"Iruka-sensei...?" Naruto looked over at him.

"What is it, Naruto?" Iruka asked.

"I..." Naruto trailed off into a momentary silence as what Iruka had said came back to mind, a pang of guilt entering his chest.

"Any time whatsoever that you feel the need to hurt yourself, I want you to promise me this. I want you to come to one of us, or even somebody like Sakura, Sasuke or Hokage-sama, just somebody who can help you or talk you through those urges. Can you do that?"

He'd made a promise to him. He'd swore that he would tell somebody before doing something like that again.

He couldn't break that promise, he'd already worried everybody so much as it was.

But... would outright telling him be easy?

No, but he had to. If not for himself, then for everybody else.

"It's... um... The urges again..." Naruto avoided eye-contact, before suddenly feeling weak. What good could telling anybody about it do? They couldn't make it go away.

"Oh, um, right... You said you were having them earlier too." Iruka felt a bit awkward at first, but regained his composure. "Do you want to talk about it...?"

As expected, Naruto shook his head.

"Well... Can you by any chance tell me what part of it you're craving the most? Is it the pain or something else?" Iruka asked, hoping Naruto would give him something to work with.

"...Mostly it's just the blood, I guess..." Naruto said. He never had really thought about the physical motivation behind self-harming, because the whole process was relaxing to him, but the best part to him would likely have to be seeing the blood. Nothing could describe in words the sense of euphoria he got while watching the blood flow from his wounds and trail down his skin.

"I see..." Iruka pondered it, before solutions started popping into his head. "Have you ever tried drawing or writing...? You used to doodle sometimes in class."

"Yeah, but that was different." Naruto pouted. "Back then, I was just bored cuz no offense, Sensei, but your lessons sucked."

"What? My lessons do *not suck*...!" Iruka retorted, feigning hurt.

"Do *too*. Drawing and pulling pranks on you was the only way I could even keep myself awake during class." Naruto drawled.

"That's because you never took anything I said seriously and kept skipping class. It's your own fault for not studying more." Iruka pointed out, sounding not only like a teacher but almost like a nagging father as well.

"Hey, it's not like I was the only one, y'know." Naruto grumbled. "Shikamaru, Chouji and Kiba did it too sometimes..."

"And I'm aware of that. I always made sure to make all four of you stay after class when you did. But it was usually you who put them up to that in the first place." Iruka said and Naruto couldn't deny it. Back in the academy he did all kinds of things that got him in trouble.

"Alright, fine, but Kiba was a jerk anyway, so he kind of deserved it." Naruto reasoned.

"You shouldn't say those kinds of things about your classmates, Naruto..." Iruka started to say, but sighed, deciding it was pointless. Naruto had matured a lot, but he was still a kid when you got to the heart of things. "Well, anyway, since drawing and writing is off the table, then what about ice? Or a red marker? That always helped me."

"A marker?" Naruto looked up at him, curious at hearing that.

"Yeah, here." Iruka pulled out a red washable marker from his pocket and handed it to him. "It won't make the urges go away completely, but it's better than nothing. Try marking on your skin a bit."

Naruto did as suggested, opening up the cap and creating several stray lines on his wrist. It definitely wasn't the most fulfilling thing, but Iruka wasn't wrong. It at least provided some level of distraction.

Iruka watched the boy with empathy as he began to speed up the process, making one line after another until his entire arm was covered with them. He didn't even want to imagine the amount of damage Naruto *normally* did to himself. More than anything, he just wished he could do something to help him.

"Can you tell me how you're feeling now? Any better?" Iruka asked.

"Yeah, kinda... A little..." Naruto took a moment to respond, but wouldn't look up, handing him back the marker. "Iruka-sensei...?"

"Hm?"

"...Do you... ever still have these urges...? Is that why you had this marker on you...?" Naruto wanted to know. However, after a second, he scratched the back of his head nervously.

"Sorry, I'm probably asking too much... It just kind of seemed a little odd, ya know...? But um it's really none of my business, so I-"

"Hey, don't worry about it, there's really no need to apologize." Iruka patted Naruto's head, before looking down at Naruto's arm. "Besides, you're right about one thing... The urges still bother me sometimes, as I'm sure they will you, but, in the end, it's just like any other addiction. You just have to fight it, no matter how hard or pointless it may seem."

Naruto didn't say anything after that.

...

When Kakashi and Sakura left the Hokage Mansion, they split up, Kakashi insisting he would take care of everything from there, that he would check up on Sasuke, for her to go on home as not to worry her parents, etc. However, upon reaching his hospital room, he discovered Sasuke had disappeared from his bed.

"Why am I not surprised...?" was his single thought before letting the nurses know and heading out to find him. Fortunately, he had already known Sasuke long enough to predict exactly where he'd be at.

...

Crash.

Particles of rock flew everywhere as Sasuke's Chidori faded. He was panting for air, still too weak from the sedative in his system.

"Come to think of it ... Wasn't Itachi working for the Anbu at the time? On top of that, t here's also this rumor going around amongst the higher brass that he was a double agent, acting as the village's pipeline. Or in other words, what you might call a spy. "

"Well, I do admit it's only a rumor, so alas, I can't say for sure if it's true or not. But let's say it was... Don't you think it's possible that they had something to do with it? Maybe he was somehow coerced *into it... Just maybe... it wasn't even his idea to* begin *with... Who's to say...?"*

Itachi was a double agent?

Coerced to commit genocide by the village?

Once again, the same denial as before entered his mind.

Who the hell would believe that?!

*And if it was true... Then **why**? Why did Itachi lie to me?!*

"Why... did you...?"

"To test my limits..."

"To... test your limits...? You... You killed them... For that?"

"I had to."

"It's not true... My brother would never do this, because..."

"Pretending to be the kind of brother you hoped for... Was to determine your ability. I continued acting as the elder brother you desired, and became your companion to see if that potential lies hidden. You found me disagreeable and hated me. You continued wanting to surpass me. Because of that, I will let you live... For my sake. "

Once more, he tried to gather chakra into his hand, ignoring the voice telling him to stop, but this time, a hand grabbed his wrist.

"Don't even try it. You've already wasted enough chakra as it is." A voice told him sternly. It was Kakashi. "I thought we already both agreed your limit was two Chidori per day, hm? Now why don't you try to calm down and tell me exactly what has you so upset?"

"I already told you it's nothing...! Why can't you just..." Sasuke started to say, but before he could finish his sentence, he lost his balance, feeling his feet cave beneath him. Before he collapsed, however, Kakashi caught him.

It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd even made it up to the top of this cliff without falling. Hospital sedatives often tended to disrupt the chakra network.

"Easy." Kakashi soothed, gently leaning him against a large boulder. "I'm not your enemy, Sasuke. I just want to help you. But I can't do that if you keep pushing me away."

"I...!" Sasuke started to retort but grew silent when he remembered how he almost choked Naruto and Kakashi twice over the past week, and then Sakura. He remembered the tears on her face.

"Whatever happened, I'm sure we can talk about it, so please, you don't have to do this... Please..."

"Stop arguing already! We're supposed to be a team, aren't we?! We're friends…! What good has fighting each other ever done for us?!"

"Neither you nor I can be called lucky... That's for sure. But we're not the most unfortunate either. You and I both have found precious friends, haven't we?"

"Hey, it's not like I'm the only one that's been pushing others away, ya know! You have no right to fault me for anything when you've been doing the same thing!"

He clenched his fists, as past words of his teammates echoed in his head.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not, everybody was right. This wasn't getting him anywhere.

Finally, after a long silence had settled between them, he realized what he needed to do.

...

When Sakura got to her house, she already knew her mom was going to be angry. She'd been dreading it all day.

Sakura almost considered taking up Ino on her offer, but she knew that the longer the delayed it, the more pissed Mibuki would be when she finally got back. (Plus, she didn't want to get Ino in trouble.)

Sure enough, when she entered the house, her mother was already onto her.

"You are in a *lot* of trouble, Sakura." Mibuki had her arms crossed

"Yeah, well just fuss at me later. I'm going to bed." Sakura didn't even want to deal with this. However a large hand grabbed her arm stopping her in her place. But it wasn't her mother, it was Kizashi.

Suddenly she tensed up, caving. There was no way she could stand up to him if he chose to do something.

"You're not going anywhere. I think you owe your mother an apology." he said.

"For what? Going on a mission? I already left a note saying where I was." Sakura countered, despite her initial fear.

"This" Mibuki held up the exact note Sakura spoke of. "is *not* how we do things. If you're going to be taking off for nearly a *week*, you tell us to our face! You don't just leave a half assed note behind and expect us to let everything slide."

"Yeah, well if you weren't yelling all the time, maybe I would have! But that's all you *ever* do anymore, so-"

"There you go again, blaming your own shortcomings on me." Mibuki said, cutting her off. "I swear. Ever since you were put on the same team as that *boy*, you've become more obstinate than *ever*. It's really no surprise, considering who he is, but do you honestly want to be like that?"

This is where something in Sakura snapped.

"Like *what*?" She glared. "Are you talking about *Naruto*? He has nothing to do with this!"

Mibuki and Kizashi seemed to tense at the sudden outburst.

"Now, calm down, honey." Kizashi tried to soothe her. "Your mother doesn't mean any harm, but she has a point. Almost everybody in this village knows that boy has a reputation of being unwanted for a reason..."

At hearing that, Sakura was beside herself, remembering the image of him tearing into his own skin, how fragile he'd felt in her arms when she hugged him, and his words to her on the

ship, the woman at the restaurant, the glares from the villagers, and, above all, those times Mibuki and Kizashi had told her to avoid Naruto when she was a child.

"Unwanted?" She clenched her fists, feeling angry tears well up into her eyes. "You don't know a single thing about him, so how can you even say such a thing?! You have no clue what he's had to put up with because of people like you! In case you forgot, it was *Naruto* who risked his life to defeat *Gaara* and even saved my life! Like it or not, *Naruto's my friend and he's been more supportive to me over this past year than either of you* ***ever*** *were*!"

That was the worst thing Sakura could have possibly said in front of them, and Mibuki didn't even hold back this time. Sakura knew the marks she left were likely going to end up as several bruises, that her lip was bleeding, but quite frankly she couldn't care less. She had got out what she wanted to say and felt no remorse for it, whatsoever.

...

A/N: It's not a lot but I hope y'all like it. I wanted to show that both Sasuke and Naruto are progressing somewhat, but this still isn't going to be an easy or immediate fix for anybody. As for Sakura, she'll get the help she needs too soon! I also feel like Mibuki and Kizashi would heavily have disapproved of Sakura being in any kind of close relationship with Naruto at that point in time given his "reputation", etc, so I plan to explore that a bit more throughout this story. And elsewhere, people have also been asking about Gaara! I think as another Jinchuriki, he'll be able to play a huge role in helping Naruto too, so I have plans of bringing him in at some point. Probably not immediately, but maybe sometime soon. Anyway, let me know what y'all think!

I also plan to have some bonding between Iruka and Kakashi, so look forward to that!

Chapter 21

Story: Melancholia Chapter 21

Also, I'm so sorry, it's been so long, y'all. Stuff kept coming back so I couldn't write.

So this chapter sorta has a trigger warning at the beginning as a flashback, but nothing too graphic?

I really don't like how this turned out, but I kind of based Naruto's feelings in this chapter off my own after similar stuff happened to me, so urm yeah. Everything feels unnatural and ooc, but I tried my best to make everything work, considering.

And Sasuke just felt...off but this was the only way to make this AU work so I'm crying.

…

Naruto felt hands on him. They were pinning him against a wall in an alley. The sky was dark and only the moonlight made it possible to make out the figure in front of him.

There was a guy standing in front of him probably around the age of forty and he smelled heavily of alcohol. Clearly, he was drunk. He glared down at the boy with the coldest expression he'd ever seen. Naruto felt his insides tighten as he swallowed.

His mind was telling him he needed to move. He had to get out of here, but his body was frozen stiff. He couldn't even breathe.

"...My wife. You took her from me. That damn monster inside of you took her from me… Tell me, why did she deserve to die, huh? What did she ever do to deserve to die? Tell me!"

"I'm sorry, I…!" Naruto uttered, but was unable to formulate a proper response. Suddenly, he felt immediate empathy for the man who had lost his lover, and looked away almost guiltily, unable to say anything else.

This, however, was a grave mistake, because next thing he knew, a fist flew into his face.

"Sorry? You're sorry? How dare you! What the hell's saying sorry gonna do to bring her back to me!? Mari was everything to me and now she's gone and it's all your fault! All your fault!" He repeated his tantra over and over again.

At some point, the man seemed to calm down, looking down at the boy who had sunk down to the wall, "Hey… Kid… You hav'a jutsu that can transform you int'a woman, right...?"

"Y-Yeah. What about it…?" Naruto replied hesitantly, getting a really bad feeling, but still not moving from his spot.

The man held up a picture of a woman with auburn hair and green eyes. "Right now, I want you to transform into her."

"Your wife? But she's-" Naruto started to say but jumped startled when the man aggressively kicked him.

"Just do what I said! And hurry it up, I don' got all night!"

"Okay, sheesh! I'm doing it, already." Naruto did as he was asked, before standing back up and turning himself into a perfect replica of the woman in the photo. "There… You happy now?"

For a long moment the man was quiet as he stared at Naruto in the form of his wife.
"...Mari."

"Um… Can I-" Before Naruto could finish his sentence, he was shoved against a wall, the man's lips smashing in him, cutting him off. His entire being went cold.

I can't breathe!

Naruto woke in a cold sweat, gasping for air. Tears clung to his eyelashes. Without even thinking, and having forgotten his surroundings entirely, he started digging into his arm which still was painted red by marker.

"You can't go around teasing people so much, if you don't plan on carrying through with it. Don't you think that's a little cruel?"

He wanted to throw up.

He needed a release.

He needed to breath.

"Naruto…?"

He needed blood.

He-

"What's wrong? Hey, talk to me." He barely registered a voice as hands desperately separated his nails from his wrist.

He couldn't move his arms. He squirmed around and shook his head, tears freely falling from his face as he tried his best to escape the grip of his attacker, lashing out any way he could in self-defense. "No, stop, let go of me! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to-!"

"Naruto, it's me, I'm not going to hurt you! Just please, listen to me. Whatever kind of dream you were having, you're safe now..."

After another moment of resistance but hearing his former teacher's voice, Naruto finally seemed to be calming down, taking in what was said. He looked above him and sure enough.

"...Iruka...sensei…?" Naruto choked out as he looked over and saw Iruka standing there. He felt a bit guilty when he saw a couple scratch marks on Iruka's face, already knowing he was the one who caused them.

"Yeah... Are you... feeling any better?" Iruka asked softly in response.

"I think so… Sorry for hurting you…" Naruto murmured in a low voice, as he started to sit up.

"Don't mention it. I'm just glad you're okay…" Iruka let go of Naruto's arms once he had seemed to calm down. "What was it you were dreaming about? It must have been pretty bad to have you that scared."

"It's nothing… I..." Naruto looking away, trying to think of what to say. Iruka was not an idiot when it came to reading him.

However, whatever response or explanation he might or might not have come up with was cut off by the door opening.

Naruto immediately turned his head away when he saw it was Tsunade stepping in.

"Hokage-sama!" Iruka jumped up and bowed in respect.

"So… How have things been going since earlier?" Tsunade asked.

"Well, over all, things have went pretty well. He did sort of scratch himself a moment ago due to a nightmare he was having, but I managed to calm him down before things got too bad. Additionally, we were also discussing some potential coping mechanisms, like with markers." Iruka explained.

Naruto wanted to protest due to his guilt over hurting Iruka, but decided to keep quiet.

"Glad to hear it." Tsunade smiled, before her smile faltered a bit as she turned to look at him. "On that note, there's actually something I came here to ask you, Naruto. I need you to be completely honest with me."

"Huh? What is it?" Naruto asked, getting an uncomfortable feeling.

Tsunade once again had to remind herself that this was for Naruto's wellbeing. She knew that he likely wouldn't want to talk about it, but she needed to confirm things for herself.

"...Have… any of the villagers been *touching* you…?" Tsunade had never thought it would be this hard for her to ask the question, but she pressed forward despite her discomfort. She needed to know. "...Or been doing anything to you that's made you uncomfortable?"

At hearing that, Iruka's eyes widened at the implication and immediately turned his head to Naruto, who seemed tenser than ever.

Naruto immediately swallowed and struggled to keep his eye contact. She knew about what was going on? How did she find out? Did anybody else know?

Oh, shit, what if it got out to others? They would all hate him. They would judge him, they would all blame him for being so weak. For not being able to stop it from happening.

He struggled to find his voice, feeling his breathing constricting.

"N...no… Why... are you asking…?..." he clutched his chest, avoiding eye contact entirely.

I need to get out of here!

Despite the temptation to run, his body felt stiff. He couldn't move.

And both Tsunade and Iruka could tell that Naruto was holding back the truth. It was blatantly obvious that Tsunade's suspicions were not only correct, but that Naruto was afraid.

Iruka was beside himself, feeling worse than ever for not having realized such a thing was going on. Who would do such a thing to him?!

Without thinking, Naruto had started scratching at his throat due to his nerves, only to be stopped by Tsunade, who moved even faster than Iruka.

"Naruto, if somebody has been hurting you, you need to tell us." She started to reach out towards him, but unfortunately the reaction this warranted was the exact opposite of what she intended.

"No, don't touch me!" Without any warning, he quickly pulled away, terrified as he backed up on his bed. "There's nothing to talk about. Leave me alone!"

"Calm down!" Iruka pled, when the boy started to get off the bed, holding him back. "I promise we're not mad at you. We just want to help, but you have to work with us..."

"No, I can't! I already said nothing's going on, so just drop it already!" Naruto didn't even know where the emotion inside of him was coming from, but he couldn't think straight.

Tsunade sighed, sparing a glance at Iruka. Once again, she approached Naruto but didn't touch him this time. "...I know why you're afraid. Believe me, I understand all too well what it is you're going through, so I'm not asking you to open up about everything right this moment… But… About what's happened to you, it isn't your fault-" She started to say but was cut off by Naruto.

"No, you're wrong! Every time it happens, my body just freezes up and I can't stop them... I… guess I feel bad for them or something, but… It's like I don't know how to respond, ya know? I'm a ninja, I'm supposed to be stronger than that, and I can't even..." He had once again pulled in on himself, clutching at his arm. It was then that he realized he'd let more than intended slip out.

Hearing him blame himself for such things tore both Tsunade and Iruka to pieces, but at least he had confirmed their suspicions, so they knew what they were dealing with.

That's when the conversation with the doctor and Naruto's delayed response came to Iruka's mind. This was why he hesitated. He was afraid to say that the villagers had been messing

with him.

"Naruto... You can't blame yourself for what somebody else did to you. You're just a child, of course you wouldn't know how to respond." Iruka immediately insisted, feeling tears welling up in his eyes. He hated this. He wished he could do more for him.

"But I should have *done* something…Yet I just keep letting it happen… I... I'm so *stupid*..." Naruto uttered, trying his best to keep himself calm.

"You are *not* stupid. What you're describing is entirely *normal* for somebody in your position. That sort of thing happens to many others too." Tsunade told him.

"What? Wait, you mean-" Naruto immediately looked back up, his eyes brimming with hope she hadn't seen in weeks.

"Yes, you're not alone." Tsunade gave a small smile.

Naruto didn't say anything, but was no doubt contemplating her words. In all honesty… Naruto still couldn't help but blame himself, but at hearing her reassurance, it was a little comforting to know he wasn't the only one.

"...Actually...," Tsunade glanced away briefly, debating if she should speak on her own past or not. It couldn't hurt, right? Shizune was the only one who knew about it, but Naruto needed as much support and reassurance as he could get right now... "A long time ago, the same thing happened to me, so I know what you're feeling right now, and how scared you must be. I understand fully well how hard it is to not blame yourself, because you feel like you weren't strong enough to stop it, but I'll say it once again, *it's not your fault*…"

This garnered the attention of both Iruka and Naruto.

"...Even *you*, Obaa-chan?" Naruto's voice was low, but he was shocked nonetheless. She was the strongest woman he knew, and yet even she too had been…?

"Yes... Even me." She reached up and softly placed a hand on the top of his head, giving a pained smile. Naruto suddenly felt a sense of warmth he didn't recognize but found himself secretly craving more of. It was almost like the way he felt with Iruka but a little... different.

The feeling only grew stronger when she reached out and began to heal the new scratch marks Naruto had created earlier on his arm due to his anxiety.

"I'm entirely aware that I can never go back and stop what happened to you, and knowing you, you'll probably end up blaming yourself for years over what happened," Tsunade murmured regrettably. "but I swear to you that I'll do everything in my power as Hokage to make sure this never happens to you again. And if there's ever anything you need to talk about, I want you to know that I'm here for you. I promise that you can trust me. I'm not going to force you to talk about anything you don't want to, because I want you to do this at your own pace, but you need to understand that we can only truly help you as long as you're willing to let us in, so when you're ready, you just have to tell one of us, okay?" Tsunade said.

In truth, Naruto still had doubts he would ever be ready to say more than he already had, but he *was grateful* they weren't trying to pressure him into it, and a small part of him wanted to believe that maybe things would be okay.

"...Okay…" He said hesitantly, before smiling sheepishly. "Thanks, Tsunade-obaa-chan."

Tsunade smirked, unable to resist from ruffling his hair. "Now, just try to get some rest. Tomorrow, you should even be able to see Sakura and Sasuke again if all goes well. Iruka, I trust you'll be alright with him?"

Iruka, who hadn't said much due to the fact that he was still trying to process everything, nodded and bowing once again. "Don't worry. You can leave him to me."

Internally, Iruka made a vow to do whatever he could for Naruto, to be there for him.

…

First thing Tsunade did when she got back to her office was throw the new stack of documents on her desk on to the floor, not hesitating to curse out loud.

The anger she'd been desperately holding back finally began to rise to the surface, consuming her. Without even thinking, she picked up her chair and tossed it towards the window, causing the glass to shatter into a thousand pieces.

As if on cue, Shizune suddenly slammed the door open and came in. "Tsunade-sama, what's wrong?! I just heard a crash, so I wanted… to check up on you..."

She trailed off into silence when she saw the look on her master's face. She recognized it all to well. Her expression reflected all too well on past experiences.

"Damn it…" The older lady cursed, biting her lip.

Quickly, Shizune approached her, tackling her right before she could throw more books and documents. "What's wrong? You've been acting weird all day, ever since Team 7 got back from their mission earlier."

"...I need a drink…" Tsunade finally muttered, sighing. However, before she could leave the room again, Shizune was blocking her path. "Get out of the way, Shizune. I said-"

"No, I won't allow you do this to yourself again!" Shizune stood her ground, despite how nervous she was. "I haven't seen you this on edge in months, if not years. Just please… Talk to me… Is this something about Naruto?"

Tsunade sighed after a moment, deciding it was pointless to deny her the answer she wanted. "...He's been self-harming… Apparently, some of the villagers have been sexually assaulting him too… Quite frankly, I feel at a loss of what to even do at this point."

Shizune was momentarily speechless at hearing that. She understood that people hated Naruto due to him having the nine tails inside of him, but *that*? That was just going too far, he was just a kid...!

Despite her discomfort at hearing the situation, however, she kept her ground. "I see… So that's why you sent him to the hospital… Well, given your past, I get upset you must be and why… But you've been doing everything you possibly can for him. It's up to Naruto alone to open up about what's been happening and that could take time."

"Don't you think I already know that?!" Tsunade snapped, startling her, unable to keep from clinching her fists, barely restraining the urge to destroy the entire building. "That's exactly why this is so frustrating. I want nothing more right now than to get the names of every single one of the monsters who even dared to lay a hand on him, but I understand all too well what that boy is feeling right now."

"...I'm sorry." Shizune looked down after a moment,

"No…" Tsunade, let out a breath she didn't even know she had been holding in. "You're right. I need to give this some deeper thought and calm myself down."

"...Well, as a suggestion, maybe you could have Naruto stay with somebody when he gets out of the hospital like one of his teammates or somebody that he trusts. For one, it'd make it easier to keep an eye on him so he doesn't hurt himself anymore, but also… It would also protect him too, in case one of the villagers try to do something to him again..."

"Huh, that's actually not a bad idea..." Tsunade mulled it over, cupping a finger over her chin. There was always the option of assigning an Anbu to stay with Naruto, but she knew that probably wouldn't go over well and she'd prefer not to use such tactics except as a last resort. Having a friend stay with him seemed to be less invasive than the latter. Additionally, it could also save him time so he doesn't have to stay in the hospital as long. "I think I'll keep that in mind."

…

The lights in Sasuke's house were out. He had found himself lying on his bed as he stared up at the ceiling and reflected on his conversation with Kakashi earlier.

"That guy… He said something about Itachi… Like he was being manipulated by the Anbu and double agent or something when he…" Sasuke clinched his fist, the image of his dead family flashing before his eyes again.

"Well, I figured it had something to do with Itachi..." Kakashi said in a calm voice, taking in what his student was saying, but his face hard to read. "Quite frankly, I have my doubts about whatever that that boy may have told you, but let's say by some chance that that was the truth. What would you then? Rush in, demand answers, and get yourself killed?"

"No." Sasuke muttered. "I have plans to take this slowly and get the answers I need, even if I have to do it from the inside… Only then will I decide what I have to do."

"Hold on…" Kakashi paused when the realization hit him. "Sasuke, you're not seriously thinking about joining the Anbu, are you? Do you have any idea what kind of risks you would be putting yourself through? The orders you would be given? Just think about it. You would be required to kill without a second thought if that's what suited the mission."

"I don't care." Sasuke said simply. "If that's what it takes to achieve my goals, then I will carry out whatever mission I have to. From this point on, I'll be making my own judgements, so don't try to stop me."

Kakashi wanted to protest, but knew he was nobody to talk, since he himself had joined the Anbu in the past as well. And if what the boy had said about Itachi was true, then it was worth it to look into. Besides, Sasuke had every right to seek out the truth behind the massacre of his clan if there was more to it than what everybody else believed. "Don't worry. I won't. But, before any of that, I first want you to give this some serious thought, and if, say, in two weeks from now, you're still this adamant about it, then I will gladly hand in my recommendation as your Teacher, Deal?"

Sasuke was silent for a moment, before snorting. "Fine, whatever..."

Kakashi smiled, patting him on the head. "Good. For now, just go home, and get some sleep, okay?"

A part of Sasuke wondered if he really was being irrational, but he quickly reminded himself that he *needed* this.

No matter what anybody else told him, he refused to be *manipulated* by Orochimaru and Itachi. He *needed* to find his own path and answers now, so he would get stronger by his own means, not by *theirs*.

After all... He couldn't hurt Sakura or Naruto anymore like he had been.

…

A/N: Sorry it's probably not as much as y'all wanted but it's been so long so I wanted to get some more up. I'll go more into Sakura in the next chapter.

So in regards to Naruto's sexual assaulters if you didn't realize, they're using him to transform for sexual favors because they're huge dicks. I only showed one of them, but there are others.

Author's Note

I sincerely apologize for the inconvenience because I know y'all are enjoying this story. But my Grandmother just died this morning due to a stroke, and we're having the funeral in a few days, so it may be a while before I'll be in the right mental state to update again, and even then it probably won't be as frequent. Quite frankly, I feel so many different emotions right now because this is the biggest loss I've ever faced so yeah. Anyway, thank you so much for being so supportive, everybody. It really means a lot.

Chapter 22 Part 1/2

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 22, Part 1/2

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

A/N: I know I said I would reply to reviews in this one, but I might be going away from home for a while so I don't have the chance. I just wanted to upload what I do have of this.

...

First thing Sakura knew when she woke up the next morning was that bruises were covering her body. She clutched at her head as she sat up. *"Ugh my head is pounding. How did I even fall asleep in the first place after all that…?"*

Upon thinking back over the previous night and looking at herself over in the mirror, Sakura felt irritation well up in her chest at both her mother and father, but also a sense of fear. She had never seen Mibuki get that angry before. Even still, she refused to apologize for calling Naruto her friend and defending him. That was something she would *never* take back.

She got up, sighing, once again, looking at her reflection. *"I should probably do something to cover up these wounds so it's not as noticeable… I'd rather not worry everybody..."*

Ignoring the wave of nausea that suddenly passed over her due to how little she had eaten, Sakura reached into her dresser and pulled out a concealer. She winced at the pain as she began to apply it, quickly finding herself frustrated when it only covered up so much. Well at least most of it didn't look nearly as bad, but some of the swelling was too obvious to truly hide and she wasn't an expert on this sort of thing, so she tried her best to tell herself that it was good enough to pass off as a simple accident, and could only hope nobody would bother questioning it.

After she started getting around to leave, she briefly wondered if she should do the same thing she did last time and leave from the window, but in the end decided to go ahead and face her parents, knowing the backlash would probably end up being twice as bad next time.

However when she got to the kitchen, she was relieved to find that Mibuki was gone. Then again, her dad was there which wasn't much better.

"I'm going off on another mission... I plan to be back some time this evening…" She said, lying about her reason for leaving. If Kizashi heard that she was going off to see Naruto at the hospital, then there was a chance he'd try to stop her from going.

Maybe if she was lucky he wouldn't try to talk much.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

"Sakura, about last night…" He placed a hand on her shoulder, causing her to instinctively grow tense due to the fear that he might try to hurt her like Mibuki had. Despite that, she stood her ground.

"What about it...?" She murmured.

"...Please, try not to be so mad at your mother. She did get a little carried away, but I promise she just wants what's best for you. She's just worried about you." He said, after a moment of hesitance. Sakura felt bile rising in her throat, tears welling up in her eyes.

She turned back and glared at him, causing him to pull back a bit.

"You really call that worried? Do you even know how much pain I'm in right now because of her? Why do you always defend the way she treats me, Tou-san?! If you truly cared about me, you would actually stand up to her, but instead you blindly excuse everything she does! Worse, you even side with her!" She snapped at him.

"Sakura-" he started to say, but Sakura quickly cut him off.

"No, just stop it, already! I'm done, okay?" She turned on her heel towards the door, wiping her eyes. "...I'll be back later..."

In truth, she still loved her mother, she really did, just as she loved her father, so she wanted to trust and forgive them both, no matter how much either one of them had hurt her. After all, they were her parents, and that was exactly why it frustrated her so much.

It was exactly *why* she so adamantly pushed away Ino's concerns like she had. A part of her wanted to defend Mibuki just as Kizashi had, despite knowing that it was wrong.

In any case, it was her problem and she could take it. There was no reason to get anybody else involved.

As she walked off, she began to feel a bit light headed, her body telling her she needed to eat, but she scolded herself, shooting down any desires to stuff her face. She had to stay in shape.

...

When Sakura reached the hospital, which was a little after 11, Sasuke was already in the waiting room. She sat down beside him, giving a small smile.

"Good morning, Sasuke-kun."

"Yeah." Sasuke barely acknowledged it. Not that she really expected any different. He never was one for small talk.

It was then that Sasuke looked over at her, one of her bruises catching his attention.

"What happened to your face?" He asked with a surprising amount of concern. Sakura grew tense at the mention, but forced a grin.

"Huh? Oh, this? It's nothing, I kind of had an accident earlier and fell is all, but I'm totally fine now. It doesn't even hurt anymore." Sakura lied, waving off his concerns.

He rose an eyebrow at her strange behavior. She was clearly hiding something, but in the end he decided not to press it.

"...You seem to get hurt a lot… You should try to be more careful." He deadpanned, turning away.

"I know…" Sakura feigned sulking, slumping over in her chair. "So are they still not letting visitors back yet?"

"No. They said we might end up having to wait another hour." Sasuke told her.

"Oh, I see. Well, at least it's better than having to wait another day again, right…? We just have to be patient..." Sakura offered the best re-assurance that she could. Despite her statement, inside she was nothing but a ball of nerves.

Her stomach started cramping up, yet again screaming for her to eat something, and although she put a hand to her stomach, she internally cursed herself for not being stronger.

All until a closed white tray was shoved in front of her.

"Here." Sasuke's voice caught her attention.

"Huh? What's this?" Sakura looked to see what Sasuke was holding out.

"Dumplings. They're for you." He said, turning his face away a bit. "I thought you might want some, so I picked them up since I was already in town."

"N-No, Sasuke-kun, you really didn't have to, I..." Sakura said nervously, feeling sick at the thought of eating such fattening food.

"It's fine, just take them." Sasuke said simply.

"Alright…" She hesitantly did as offered. However, she still couldn't bring herself to touch the food itself. "Thanks, but I'll have to eat them later."

Sasuke once again wanted to ask why she was pushing herself so far because she was obviously hungry and pale too. But in the end, he decided against it. It wasn't like he could force her to eat.

Maybe he should tell Kakashi, if he didn't already know.

…

"Um... excuse me, you're Uzumaki Naruto's teammates, right?" A woman's voice snapped them out of their thoughts.

"Yes, that's right. So is Naruto alright? Can we go back and see him yet?" Sakura got up, with hope in her eyes.

"Well, yes.. But right we can only allow one visitor at a time, if that's okay…" The woman said hesitantly.

"O-oh… Of course..." Sakura started to look back at Sasuke to see if he wanted to go back first, because it had been the longest for him since he saw Naruto. "Sasuke-ku-"

However, Sasuke cut her off. "You go first. I'll wait out here."

"Are you sure? I don't mind staying in the waiting room for a little while."

"No, it's fine. I can tell you want to see him." Sasuke smirked a bit, looking up at her.

It took Sakura a brief moment to realize what he was implying, feeling her face heat up beyond her control. "Sasuke-kun, that isn't what this is about…! He-"

"I know. Just go talk to him already. Knowing him, Naruto's probably dying from impatience because he misses you." Sasuke said. Sakura couldn't even tell if he was joking this time. Quite frankly, it was probably true because it was Naruto they were talking about and patience had never been his strong suit.

"Naruto said he's really looking forward to seeing you tomorrow."

Kakashi's voice suddenly echoed in her head, bringing a warmth to her chest. It was then that she caved. "Well, if you insist, I guess it doesn't really matter which one of us sees him first. I'll be back in a little while, okay?"

Sasuke regarded her with a low grunt.

...

"Uzumaki-san, you have a visitor."

Naruto looked up, immediately grinning when he saw Sakura walk in next to a nurse.

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto exclaimed, excitedly as the Sakura thanked the woman. Iruka noticed the swelling on Sakura's face but didn't say anything.

"You sure look more life-like than you did yesterday." Sakura noted with a smirk.

"Yeah, well, I had some time to cool my head a bit, so I'm alright now. Sorry for worrying you…" Naruto said sheepishly.

"It's alright. More importantly, I just want you to focus on getting better, okay?" Sakura smiled softly after taking a moment to console him. She sat down in another chair which happened to be on the other side of his stretcher. "So how are you doing, I mean *really* …? Have you… had anymore urges…?"

"...Yeah, a few here and there I guess, but Iruka-sensei helped me through them, so it's nothing I wasn't able to handle, ya know?" Naruto said, grinning lightly.

"Good, I'm glad." Sakura said. Her face heated up when her teammate moved closer to examine her.

"Woah, what happened to your face? Did somebody hurt you? " Naruto inquired with concern, noticing the same thing Iruka had. "Alright, that does it! Just tell me who it was and I'll kick their ass!"

"Hey, don't worry about it. It was just an accident is all. I kinda fell again, stupid, right?" Sakura nervously pushed him back, cringing as she rubbed her cheek. She waving a hand dismissively, before receiving a worried glance from not only Naruto, but also Iruka, who seemed suspicious who seemed suspicious of her story. "Anyway, I barely feel a thing now, really! Anyway, have you had lunch yet? If not, they should be bringing your food in soon, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Come to think of it you're right. I am pretty hungry…" Naruto mused at the mention. Sakura was grateful that Naruto was pretty easy to fool, but could tell that Iruka hadn't bought it for an instance.

Perhaps it was because he was a teacher and had seen more than his fair share of kids who were victims of abuse, but he wasn't an idiot and that much was obvious. Much to her thanks, however, he didn't push the matter.

…

Over the course of the next thirty minutes, Sakura listened with a small smile as Naruto prattled on about each and every little thing that came to his mind, whether it be how much he was looking forward to eating Ichiraku ramen once he got out, or his very… *wordy* opinions on the doctors and nurses at the hospital.

Occasionally, she'd give light remarks like, "Naruto, you shouldn't say stuff like that" but mostly she was just quiet.

Finally, Naruto's tray was brought in, consisting of rice, vegetable soup, steak and a cup of fruit in syrup, before Iruka was also handed a closed white styrofoam plate. Since he had been left in charge of looking after Naruto constantly, only stepping out and leaving other staff in charge of him briefly for bathroom breaks, it only made sense he would have to get food at the hospital as well and Tsunade had ensured that his meals would be covered. It wasn't a traditional allowance at hospitals, but considering the circumstances, Tsunade's word was to be followed.

Sakura inwardly shuttered, trying to imagine the amount of fat and calories all of it contained. That's when she remembered the dumplings Sasuke had got her. She hated the idea of giving his gift to somebody else, but it would be even worse to waste them, right? Maybe Naruto would eat them.

"Hey, Naruto, do you want these?" Sakura held up the box to him.

"What are they?" Naruto asked, looking inside of the bag, surprised when he saw what it was. "Dumplings? But, Sakura-chan, these are your favorite!"

"I know, but I'm on a diet, so I really shouldn't..." Sakura dismissed, a guilty look on her face.

"Are you sure?" Naruto asked hesitantly. The idea of taking her favorite desert just felt wrong for some reason.

"Yeah, go ahead, I'd rather not eat them." Sakura insisted.

"Well, if you say so… Here, take my vegetable soup instead, then!" Naruto offered. "It's lunch, so you need to eat *something* , right?"

It was true that part of him was concerned about Sakura not eating, but in truth he really didn't want to eat it.

"No way, you keep that, Naruto…! I just ate something a little while ago..." Sakura said, lying. "Besides, you need more vegetables in your system as it is! All you do is gorge on ramen, so maybe it's a good thing you have a chance to eat something else for a change."

"But I *hate* vegetables." Naruto grumbled.

"Naruto, vegetables are good for you. She's right. You really should add other things to your diet." Iruka quipped in. In some ways he understood Naruto's feelings on the matter. As a kid he had always hated vegetables, but over time, he'd grown to appreciate them, at least more than Naruto did currently.

"Not you too, Iruka-sensei…" Naruto pouted, looking more dejected than ever. Sakura and Iruka both couldn't help but laugh a bit. After some time of glaring at the vegetable soup, particularly the little green evil demons known as peas floating in the stock, he breathed in, turning his intense gaze to and pointing at Iruka. "Alright, fine, challenge accepted! But you're gonna owe a hell of a lot of ramen for this!"

"Wait, where did that come from?" Iruka smiled nervously, but was shocked when Naruto actually started eating them.

When Naruto finished off the soup bowl, he struggled to say: "I actually… did it…"

Quickly, however, he moved to start on the steak right after.

No surprise there.

…

A/N: It could be a while before I upload the next part. I'm so sorry ya'll.

Chapter 22 Part 2/2

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 22, Part 2/2
Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.
A/N: As it turns out, I'm actually going off tonight because I need to finish my school assignment first, so I figured I'd go ahead and finish up this chapter.

...

This isn't much but the next chapter will have more. I could be away for a while, but right now, I really need to look after my mental health because I'm on the verge of doing something really reckless so I know it'll be the best thing for me.

…

After another thirty minutes had passed and some woman came in and collected Naruto's tray, Sakura decided it was probably best she leave so Sasuke could talk to him. In truth, she wanted to stay longer, but she didn't want to be selfish. Besides, she had to meet up with Tsunade in a couple hours anyway, and she knew Sasuke wanted to see Naruto just as much as she had.

"Oh, sorry, Naruto… I'm actually going to be doing some training with Lady Tsunade today, so I should probably go ahead and leave now."

"What? Already?" Naruto pouted, making Sakura feel a little guilty. "Well, alright, just make sure you come back to visit, okay? This place is so boring!"

"Don't worry. I will. I'll try to be back some time this evening." Sakura smiled.

Naruto almost had the temptation to ask to hug her goodbye, but restrained, knowing Sakura probably wouldn't like it. He was shocked however, when she did it anyway even without being prompted, wrapping an arm around him. In truth, she hadn't even really thought about it before doing it.

"I'll see you later, alright...?" She said in a sheepish voice, bringing a blush to not only Naruto's face, but also her own.

"Oh, r-right…" Naruto's voice cracked, surprised by the gesture. Her warmth felt nice. As she pulled away, he secretly wished it would last longer, and yet that familiar self-loathing set in, telling him he didn't deserve it. To avoid making her worry about him, however, he quickly quipped in a remark. "I can't believe you're really going to be training with Tsunade Obaa-chan, though. She may be old, but that woman can sure pack one hell of a punch! Just be careful, ya know?"

As Sakura started to leave, Iruka decided to speak up. He wouldn't feel right if he didn't at least try to confront her on the matter.

"Hold on a second, Sakura. Do you mind if I speak with you for a minute outside the room?" He asked, throwing away his now empty plate.

Sakura nervously looked over at him, before following him out the door. "Oh, sure."

"I'm going to be right out in the hallway, Naruto. Don't do anything reckless while I'm out there, okay?" Iruka said, sparing a glance behind him at his other former student.

"You don't need to worry about me, sensei. It's not like you're leaving me for a whole week or anything." Naruto shrugged it off.

"Right." Iruka sighed, before looking back at Sakura and giving her a small smile. "Come on."

"What is it you wanted to talk about, Sensei?" Sakura asked once they were out in the hallway.

Iruka struggled to find his words, but once again told himself it couldn't be put off. "Those injuries… They're not really from an accident, are they…?"

"What are you… saying? I told you I fell." Sakura immediately sounded uncertain, unable to keep eye contact. Immediately, Iruka's suspicions were confirmed.

"Sakura… If somebody hurt you, we can talk about it. You know you can trust me, right...?" Iruka kneeled down in front of her, slightly favoring Kakashi.

"I…" Sakura briefly hesitated as if considering his words, but immediately after looked away, clearly ashamed. "No, I shouldn't… I really need to go."

At hearing that, Iruka knew it would only make matters worse if he tried to force her to stay and talk. He would have to tell Kakashi or Tsunade if he happened to see them. But Sakura did say she was going to be training with Tsunade later, so maybe she would confront the girl as well. Tsunade was the best medical ninja out there, and probably had more knowledge on most of this than he did, so this was no doubt a good thing for her. A part of him still wanted to question about her not eating, but that too was probably best left up to Tsunade, who would easily recognize the symptoms of an eating disorder if that's what was going on with her.

"Alright, but try to be safe, okay?" He said placing a hand on her shoulder, feeling a pang of hurt when she flinched. "And good luck with your training with Hokage-sama. You were one of my brightest and most headstrong students, so I know you'll do well. I believe in you."

"Right… Thanks, Iruka-sensei." Sakura bowed, feeling a boost of confidence at hearing his praise, before she ran off towards the lobby.

Iruka sighed once again, but got up and stepped back into the room where Naruto was. He was glad the boy didn't try something sneaky like jumping out the window, but somehow that didn't make it any easier when he looked up to see him angrily marking his arm with red lines with the marker he'd given him.

"Naruto…" His tongue suddenly felt heavy as he cautiously approached him.

"Oh!" Naruto jumped at bit at seeing his former teacher's figure in the corner of his eye. His eyes seemed glazed over for a moment, but then he looked away feeling guilty for worrying him again. He quickly hid his arm. "I... um… Sorry, sensei…"

"No, don't apologize. You haven't done anything wrong. I'm just glad you used the marker instead of your nails like the last time." Iruka said, sitting back at his bedside. "So do you want to talk about it...?"

He could already guess the answer judging from the past few times this had happened, but decided to ask anyway.

Naruto simply shook his head. As expected.

Iruka wished more than anything that he could offer more help for Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke too.

They clearly all needed support, but if they wouldn't open up, there was only so much he and the others could do for them.

…

A/N: Naruto has semi-started to use his coping mechanisms though which is good. NEXT CHAPTER WILL GET MORE INTO SASUKE AGAIN

Chapter 23

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 23

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

A/N: Y'all it's been forever since I wrote anything for this fanfic, I'm so sorry. I've been going through a lot over the past year. I've been dealing with grief, moved to another city, court (because some guy raped me), got developed with Arthritis and I've also started school and working again. I'm actually on a leave of absence right now.

Also, I hope y'all didn't mind me inserting a little headcanon of mine that Sasuke likes to read some manga on the side and since Kishimoto considers Toriyama his idol, I figured why not make Dragon Ball the subject of the conversation between Sasuke and Naruto? I recently caught up with Dragon Ball actually, so I sorta recommend it, it's actually not that bad.

THAT SAID. The comparison between Vegeta and Sasuke, is uh… I'm not sure if it's appropriate, but I based it sorta on personal experiences, because even me and my autistic self, I've clung to characters before based on the loss of loved ones and other personal experiences. For example, I relate to Naruto and wish I had a father figure like Iruka in my life as somebody who lost my father at a really young age(Sure I had one but I never had the chance to be close to him, so it was a lot like not having a father growing up). Recently I even cried on the scene after the massacre where Sasuke looked at the place where that one old lady used to greet him at before he came home to an empty house and broke down. It struck a cord with me because it reminded me of the loss of my grandma. I don't know if I've cried before on that scene but it really hit me hard this time because I knew that feeling.

In Sasuke and Naruto's cases, I think it would be totally normal and okay for kids to have fictional characters they cling to, but let me know what y'all think, I can change it up if y'all think it's a bit odd.

Anyways, enjoy!

…

"Okay, you can go back now, Sasuke-kun. I'm sorry for making you wait so long…"

Sasuke looked up to see his pink haired teammate standing in front of him with a slightly guilty look on her face.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it." He said simply, getting up.

"Well, I'm going to train with Hokage-sama in a little while, so I should go. I'll see you later." Sakura waved a bit, heading to the front door.

"Yeah..." Sasuke said, getting up, and heading over to ask the attendants what room Naruto was in. Due to it apparently being in a different section of the building than normal, a nurse chose to show him the way.

Upon entering Naruto's room, he met face to face with his blonde teammate, who looked a bit startled by his appearance. "S-Sasuke…!?"

"What's wrong? You seem surprised to see me…" Sasuke rose an eyebrow.

"Yeah, well, nobody *told* me you would be coming here." Naruto muttered.

"Do you have a problem with it? If you want me to leave, I will." Sasuke offered simply.

"No, it's not like that… I just…" Naruto fidgeted nervously. "After what happened the other day, I wasn't even sure if you wanted to be *around* me anymore, let alone *talk* to me…"

"Tch, I'm *here* , aren't I…? So what are you worrying for…?" Sasuke looked away with a light blush on his face. " ...*Usuratonkachi* ."

Naruto couldn't help but feel a bit of relief at hearing Sasuke's attempt at reassurance. Putting his hands in his pockets, Sasuke sat down beside him on the chair that Sakura had been sitting in earlier.

"So how are you feeling…?" Sasuke glanced over at him.

"...What, you mean like right now?" Naruto asked. "Honestly, I can't *stand* it here, just sitting around and doing nothing all day… I've always hated hospitals… And some of the nurses and doctors have been really rude to me before." Naruto said, clutching at the hospital blanket. "Maybe they haven't done anything this time because Kakashi-sensei and Iruka-sensei have been with me. Still, I've kinda been on edge ever since I came here…"

Iruka, who had been wordlessly observing them, couldn't help but be slightly concerned over what he had just said. Experiencing hostility from nurses would be more than enough reason to not want to come back to a place, for *any* person, really.

"What kinds of things have the nurses and doctors done to make you so uncomfortable, Naruto?" He asked.

"Well, usually it's things like pretending to 'accidentally' drop meals or spilling hot drinks on me, but there's been a few occasions that they would carelessly stick me with needless when they were drawing blood and they did it *everywhere except* the spot I told them to." Naruto said bitterly. "This *one* lady was especially hateful, she wouldn't even *listen* to me when I tried to talk to her, so she jabbed me about 6 times before finally doing it in my left arm where I'd told her to. Afterwards, I was really bruised because of it. I swear, people like that annoy the crap out of me. If they hate their job so much then give it to somebody else who will at least *pretend* to care."

"Hmph... For once, I have to agree with you. I don't like the staff here anymore than you do. They're annoying." Sasuke said simply. He too had his own reasons, but the behavior varied much more. Some nurses had gotten somewhat flirty with him before, which not only pissed him off but also made him more uncomfortable than he'd like to admit. The other looks he

received usually ranged anywhere from pity to fear, similar to how he had seen Shinobi treat members of the Uchiha clan members before.

"I'm sorry that happened to you, Naruto. They shouldn't have acted that way, especially not to a patient." Iruka said. "Is that why you hate needles so much?"

Naruto fidgeted with the red marker in his hand as he thought about it. "Well, I mean… not exactly… I never liked shots *before* either, but I guess my fear of them *has* gotten a bit worse since then."

"I see…" Iruka noted.

Sasuke studied the red marks on Naruto's skin. "So what's with your arms? You must be pretty bored to be drawing on yourself."

"Oh, uh… this…? It's nothing… I just…" Naruto unintentionally stammered, losing the resolve to answer.

"Well, it's a sort of coping mechanism that he's trying to work on. We're figuring out what might help him with the urges." Iruka spoke up for him, deciding it would be better that Sasuke knew.

"Yeah, that…" Naruto felt his face heat up, worried that Sasuke would tease or berate him over it. But he didn't. Instead, the Uchiha seemed pretty content with the explanation overall.

"Is that so." He responded with ease.

For a long time, neither one of them spoke. A stuffy silence had filled the room, making it overwhelming awkward between them. Iruka wasn't fairing much better, debating if he should say something to break the silence..

That's when Iruka remembered something. "Hey, Sasuke, do you ever read manga?"

Any conversation starter would be better than none at this point, and, fortunately, Naruto's interest seemed peaked at the very least.

"...Yeah, but mostly when I was younger." Sasuke seemed taken aback by the question, but complied nonetheless. "My father didn't really like me engaging in activities he considered counterproductive to my training, but my brother would sometimes pick up manga from the library and bring them home with him for me to read without his knowledge. Why do you ask…?"

It was strange for him speak about Itachi without animosity in his voice, so a part of it even surprised Sasuke himself. Unfortunately, even with good memories, negative ones soon followed, leaving him feeling bitter and wishing things could have stayed that way. But they couldn't. What had been taken from him… it could never be gotten back.

"Because Naruto loves manga." Iruka's voice reminded him of his surroundings, making him realize he'd got lost in thought. "Why don't you tell each other your favorite one?"

The man smiled, hoping this would get them to converse.

"...I like Dragon Ball…" Sasuke mumbled, feeling his face heat up a bit. He wasn't used to talking about these kinds of things, least of all with Naruto. For that matter, would his choice of manga be seen as lame because of how popular and mainstream it was?

"Really?! Dragon Ball is my favorite one too!" Naruto exclaimed, startling Sasuke by how amped up he suddenly was. "Shikamaru and Chouji thought it was a bit lame because of how generic the plot was, but none of that matters to me, ya know! The characters are all I care about! So who's your favorite?"

"It's Vegeta…" Sasuke mumbled.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised. Now that you mention it, I always thought you kind of reminded me of him…" Naruto observed.

"I guess I did relate to him some…" Sasuke looked away, a forlorn expression on his face.

"Why? Is it because of your clan?" Naruto took a wild guess out of curiosity but also not wanting to offend him or anything.

Iruka, with his limited memory of reading bits and pieces of Dragon Ball, could immediately take a guess why. The Saiyans were a race of warriors whose planet had been obliterated by a tyrant known as Frieza, their race all but wiped out, minus for a few Saiyans that were off planet at the time.

When reading manga or books, it really wasn't all that unusual for a child to cling to characters they shared similar experiences with. Even he'd found himself relating to fictional characters before as well.

That said, making such a comparison to a fictional character over something like *this* could be considered really offensive if it were anybody else. But this was Naruto, he didn't always know when to draw that line. Fortunately, Sasuke didn't seem all that bothered by the question, minus for the bad memories it brought up.

"...Yeah, but also..." Sasuke mumbled. *It wasn't just that.*

Vegeta's rivalry with Goku and his desire to surpass the other Saiyan had fascinated him ever since he was a little kid. While many kids tended to lean more towards favoring Goku, as he was usually revered as the strongest, Sasuke had always been rooting for Vegeta to finally get his chance at victory. Mikoto had even chuckled a bit at how amped up Sasuke had gotten when Vegeta finally went Super Saiyan for the first time.

Vegeta always gave his all to keep up with Goku and, maybe it was due to Fugaku's constant pressure on him to be just like Itachi at the time, but that was something that resonated with young Sasuke, who had always had his own insecurities in wanting to catch up to his brother, the same feeling that later also repeated itself with Naruto.

And yet… he would probably be teased over it if he said that.

"Forget it." He said before smirking a bit. "Let me guess… Naruto, your favorite is *Goku* , *isn't* it?"

"Yeah, but I also really like Piccolo for some reason. He's funny." Naruto snickered a bit before whispering into Sasuke's ear. "And just between you and me, he reminds me a bit of Iruka-sensei."

Truthfully, Naruto did sort of see himself in Goku as another orphan who didn't always follow social regulations, but something about Piccolo's fatherly bond with Gohan had really drawn him in.

"Piccolo, huh…? I see what you mean…" Sasuke couldn't help but snort a bit at the comparison. Similar to Piccolo, Iruka was strict and had a no-nonsense approach to his teaching methods, but he was also supportive and kind when it came down to it. Sasuke had looked up to him ever since childhood, and whether it was a subconscious choice or not, he was the only person he ever called sensei.

Iruka knew they were talking about him, but seeing Naruto smiling again was enough to let it slide.

"Back in the academy, I used to skip classes with Shikamaru, Chouji and Kiba a lot just to read the latest volumes." Naruto reminisced, before pouting. "Iruka-sensei always ended up giving us a lecture over it, though."

"Hmph, no wonder you got held back three years in a row over the *kage bunshin no jutsu* , *dobe* …."

"It's not my fault that h-" Naruto started to argue, but before he could say what he what he wanted to, the door was slipped open and Shikamaru stepped in, surprising Naruto a bit.

"Hey, Iruka-sensei, the Godaime sent me here to tell you to go home and get some rest since you've been here all night. She wants me to cover for you in the meantime." Shikamaru informed him.

"Oh, alright. I am getting a little tired. Does she want me to come back again tonight then?" Iruka wanted to know.

"Yeah, if you could. If not, it's whatever. I'll just stay with him until tomorrow." Shikamaru offered, encouraging him to get whatever amount of sleep he needed. "I told her Kakashi-sensei would be a better choice to have instead, but she insisted it be me. I'm not sure why, but she seemed pretty adamant about it…"

"Hm… That is kind of odd… Well, thank you for agreeing to look after him, either way." Iruka said as he got up.

"Don't mention it. It's no problem, really." Shikamaru smiled a bit.

"I guess I'll be back later, Naruto. You'll be okay here, right?" Iruka asked. He was truthfully a bit hesitant about leaving the boy's side, but Shikamaru was a chuunin now. He was more than capable of handling himself for something like this.

"Yeah, I'll see you later, Iruka-sensei." Naruto had expected Kakashi to come back by, not Shikamaru. Still, he couldn't complain too much.

"Take care of yourselves." Iruka said, before leaving the room.

Now it was just Shikamaru, Naruto and Sasuke. Shikamaru took a moment to sit in the now vacant seat.

"I think I should go as well." Sasuke said, suddenly feeling as though he would be intruding if he stayed. Shikamaru probably had some questions he wanted to ask Naruto, anyways.

Besides, even though Sasuke still wanted to get more answers from him, he was worried that putting pressure on him right now would make things worse than they already were or just upset him. The topic of the villagers could wait until Naruto was ready.

"Ah. Okay."

"Actually… Before I leave, there's something I wanted to ask you first." Sasuke started to speak back up with a bit of hesitation. "Earlier, I gave Sakura some dumplings before she came back here. Do you… know if she ate them?"

"Dumplings…? Oh, uh… No…, Sakura-chan said she was on a diet so she gave them to me…" Naruto said, only now realizing where Sakura had gotten them from.

"Tch. I figured as much..." Sasuke felt a bit of frustration at hearing that, letting himself out of the room after that.

"A diet…?" Shikamaru inwardly scoffed, briefly thinking about Ino. *"Just what is it with girls and their obsession with losing weight…?"*

Then again, from what he'd heard from Ino, even *she* seemed to have some pretty noteworthy concerns about Sakura's appearance, which was saying a lot coming from *her* .

Leaning back in his chair and locking his hands together behind his head, he turned his attention back to Naruto, who hadn't said anything since Sasuke left the room.

"The Godaime told me what happened. I already had a general idea of the situation from what Sakura said yesterday, but I didn't expect to get put in charge of watching over you…

Not that I have a problem with it, of course. Just between you and me, this is more my kind of mission." Shikamaru smirked a bit, hoping it would offer some reassurance. And it wasn't a lie, the boy would take any opportunity he could just to sit down, he hadn't had a break for a while.

"What all did they say to you…?" Naruto mumbled.

"Nothing much to be honest, just that you'd been hurting yourself, and the Godaime mentioned that it had something to do with the villagers, but she didn't really specify what it was. I think she was probably hoping that I would get you to open up to me about it, but I'm not really the type of guy who likes prying into people's personal business… Just know if you wanna talk or something, I'll be here, alright?"

For a long time, Naruto didn't respond, silence filling the room, until finally he spoke back up.

" *Nee* , Shikamaru…?" He felt his throat tighten up and without thinking about it he started rubbing his thumb over his wrist where he'd drawn on himself earlier.

Shikamaru chose to ignore it as long as he didn't start using his nails.

"Hm…?" He inquired.

"...Do you… think there's something wrong with me…?" Naruto asked in a low voice, wanting to get an idea of how the other boy actually felt about this whole situation; What he thought of *him* for doing such a thing.

Shikamaru gave him a moment to continue speaking if he was going to. Naruto, however, didn't say anything further, so Shikamaru took that as a go-ahead to answer his question.

"Is this about you cutting yourself?" Shikamaru already had an idea of what Naruto was referring to, but had to be sure.

Naruto gave a small nod of confirmation, unable to look him in the eye.

"No, I don't." Shikamaru said simply. "While I don't really like the idea of self-harm as a coping mechanism, it's not like I'm gonna say you're crazy for it or anything. Besides, I've seen the way this village treats you, Naruto, so I figured you must have a reason for it."

Shikamaru had a rather laid back personality and the ability to remain impartial on a lot of things attitude wise. As such, he usually tried to avoid digging into people's personal affairs, which always made him fairly easy to get along with in situations like this.

Perhaps that was why, at that moment, Naruto wanted to trust him.

He wanted to *tell* somebody.

He *needed* to.

About fifteen minutes passed before he finally gathered the courage to speak again.

"...Can I… tell you something…? It's um… kind of personal…" he mumbled weakly, still a bit reluctant.

"Yeah, just try not to stress yourself out too much, alright…?" Shikamaru said, feeling Naruto's tone was a bit concerning. "I kinda get the feeling you're not quite ready to talk about it yet."

"...It's not that." Naruto insisted. Tsunade and Iruka already knew. Sakura probably had an idea. He couldn't even say it was a secret anymore or something only *he* knew. So what was the problem? "I'm guess I'm just afraid what you and some of the others would think of me if you knew..."

"Knew *what* ?" Shikamaru inquired.

"I… Just forget it… 's nothing." Naruto murmured, but started scratching at his wrist without thinking about it. Shikamaru, who had moved over to the seat next to Naruto's bedside, grabbed his hands to stop him, not wanting to take any risks.

"Look, Naruto…" His voice wavered more than he intended, but he couldn't help it. Naruto was seriously worrying him right now. "I'm not gonna pressure you to talk if you don't want to, but whatever this is about, I promise you can tell me. I'm *not* gonna judge you…"

At hearing that, Naruto tried his best to relax as Shikamaru's hand helped to keep him grounded. Unfortunately it only provided so much comfort when confronted with the memories of his past again.

"It's about some of the villagers… They sometimes touch me… and make me do things I don't want to… And recently, they…" Naruto had to gather every ounce of his willpower to finally say it, but in doing so, he felt dirty. Even talking about this stuff caused his face to heat up in shame. He couldn't even bring himself to finish the initial sentence. "I can't stand it… It's like… every time it happens, my body… it just freezes up and I can't do anything to stop it from happening. I hate it… I hate being this way…"

Before he realized it, his breathing was becoming erratic, and he had went off into a tangent, pulling his hand loose to dig into his neck. Everything he had been bottling up rose to the surface at once.

"Hey, it's okay… Just calm down." Shikamaru encouraged him, reaching back out and plying his nails away from his skin for the second time. Unfortunately, Naruto refused to cooperate at first, causing him to have to tighten his grip. "Stop that... I'm willing to listen, but I can't let you hurt yourself."

Shikamaru didn't want to use his shadows over something like this, but it was possible that he would end up being left with no choice if Naruto continued trying to scratch himself.

Fortunately, however, Naruto's finally seemed to relax again, but Shikamaru still didn't feel comfortable letting go just yet.

Naruto remained silent, giving Shikamaru to speak back up.

"...Naruto, these people you're talking about… Did they… rape you…?" Shikamaru felt a sick sense of helplessness as soon as the words came out of his mouth. This was, no doubt, the hardest thing he'd ever had to ask somebody before.

Naruto's lack of response was all the confirmation Shikamaru needed to confirm his suspicions.

…

A/N: Sorry I only focused on Naruto's side of the story for this one, but I hope y'all enjoyed it. I haven't written much for Shikamaru so I was constantly questioning dialogue that I had and rearranging stuff etc. I hope to get back into Sakura and Sasuke more next chapter. I was originally gonna have Sasuke ask Naruto about some things again, but I decided against it because I still have a plan yet for that, and as of right now, he's still trying to respect Naruto's recovery and a certain part of him was worried that he might make things worse by pressuring him to talk right away.

Chapter 24

Story: Melancholia, Chapter 24

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto.

So, I really don't like how this chapter turned out at all. I kept rewriting scenes but in the end, I decided to go with it how it is now, but still SO WORRIED HOW I WROTE TSUNADE BTW. I TRIED MY BEST BUT AGHHH

…

He knows.

This was the first thought that registered in Naruto's mind after the words left Shikamaru's mouth.

"...Naruto, these people you're talking about… Did they… rape you…?"

He felt his body go cold as the question replayed in his mind again.

Rape.

It was a word that he'd been intentionally avoiding using up to now, to himself and especially to others. Because admitting that he had been raped also meant admitting that he wasn't *clean* anymore. He had been completely violated, and that wasn't something he could *ever* get back.

Bile rose to his throat, a wave of nausea hitting him like a ton of bricks.

"Naruto… Hey, talk to me…" Shikamaru called out his name to get a response.

"...Sorry." Naruto mumbled.

"Sorry for what, exactly…?" Shikamaru asked, confused.

"...For losing control... I can tell it upset you..." Naruto said, relaxing his hands in Shikamaru's. "Iruka-sensei gave me a marker to draw on myself with when I got stressed out, and I mean it sorta helps, I guess, but…"

"*That's* what this is about…?" Shikamaru asked, surprised by the conversation change again, but decided to just go with it anyway. "Look, these things take time. Hell, I've even gotten onto Asuma-sensei for smoking before, but most people aren't just gonna automatically start relying on a new coping mechanism to curb an addiction every time the urge hits them. It's something you have to work with. That said, drawing on yourself might not be the answer."

"Then what should I do…? I can't stand worrying everybody like this." Naruto mumbled, frustrated with himself.

"Well, maybe you should explore other options as well." Shikamaru suggested.

"Other options, like what…?" Naruto mused.

"For starters, I was thinking of something like putting ice on your skin or playing with a rubber band or… Actually, hold on a second. I might have something even better." Shikamaru reached into one of his pockets, pulling out an odd looking cube that had some buttons and switches as well as other contraptions on it. "You see, there are these things called fidget cubes and you can play around with them when you get bored or anxious. I have a ton of them around the house, so you can have this one if you think it might help."

"Oh, thanks, Shikamaru." Naruto took it and began toying with it out of curiosity. Surprisingly, it actually seemed to help stimulate him much more than the red marker had.

"It's no problem. And hey, if *that* doesn't help, then I promise to help you find something that *does*, alright?" Shikamaru smiled a bit.

"Alright." Naruto returned the gesture.

"So… about what we were discussing earlier… Can you… tell me a little bit more about that, like how long it's been going on for?" Shikamaru asked cautiously, not wanting to upset him again.

"...It depends what you're referring to. Just them touching me, or…?" As he spoke, Naruto rolled his finger over one of the small metal balls that were sticking part way out of the cube, he still couldn't bring himself to say *that word*.

"I mean *everything*..." Shikamaru clarified.

"...I'm actually not sure, maybe a little less than a year ago? Sorry, some of my memories are kinda fuzzy." Naruto explained.

"It's okay. Just take your time." Shikamaru offered some reassurance.

Still, *about a year*?

Shikamaru felt like throwing up. Not out of disgust towards Naruto, of course, but because in all the time that this had been going on, nobody had suspected a single thing. As somebody who was supposed to be Naruto's friend, he too couldn't help but feel partly responsible.

"I remember at the time there was some drunk guy who told me to transform into his dead wife, and, in a way, I guess in a way I felt bad for him, so I did what he asked me to, but… I didn't expect him to start touching me or kissing me…" Naruto's voice cracked.

"You said there were others too… So when did *they* start messing with you…?" Shikamaru asked.

Naruto thought back to it. "...Well, a few weeks after that, I think that guy spread some rumors about me, because other villagers started to approach me as well. They'd always ask

me to transform into partners that they'd lost in the Kyuubi attack. I didn't feel like I had a choice in it, ya know? If I fought back, they'd…"

While he hadn't been lying when he said his body had frozen up, the truth was that wasn't the only reason he didn't stop them. He never felt like he had a right to say no due to knowing what was inside of him. At some point, he'd just started to accept it as some sort of punishment because he was the vessel for the beast that had killed everybody they loved. When it happened, he never wanted to hurt anybody, least of all some villagers who couldn't fight back. If he did, it would only prove them right.

It would tell the world that he was a heartless monster just like everybody said he was.

The truth was some of them even *thanked* him for not fighting back or hitting them; *for just sitting back and letting them do what they wanted to him.*

But he couldn't say any of that without telling Shikamaru the truth about himself.

What would he think if he found out about the Kyuubi?

Sakura and Sasuke had accepted him after learning the truth, so did that mean Shikamaru would too? For that matter what was the point of even hiding it anymore if Shikamaru was probably just gonna find out about it out on his own anyways…?

So far, Shikamaru had been fairly supportive, so could he trust him, after all…?

…

In the end, Naruto had decided to tell him everything.

And shockingly, Shikamaru wasn't all that surprised. Well, he *was* but it made sense of some pretty big questions he'd had for a while now, and besides, it wasn't like it was something Shikamaru could hate Naruto himself for. If *anything*, he had saved the village from the Kyuubi in a way, simply by acting as its host.

"So that's why… I think I get it now… But still, that doesn't make any of this okay. They've been *abusing* you." Shikamaru argued.

"...Yeah, I guess… but can I really blame them for it…? After all, they have families that were taken away from them by this thing inside of me. Who knows, maybe they have a right to hate me for it…" Naruto let his bangs shadow his eyes as he spoke. He more grateful than ever for the fidget cube that Shikamaru had given him to keep him from reaching for his wrist.

"No. You're a good person, Naruto..." Shikamaru said, not wanting to hear him even suggest such a thing. "And what they've been doing to you… It isn't *right*…"

It was a simple statement, but for somebody who had been holding this secret inside for as long as he had, Naruto needed to hear it, to be validated.

His chest hurt more than he could stand and, within seconds, he broke down in tears.

"...I just wish I had been stronger to stop it…" Naruto finally choked out, covering his eyes with his hand, and running his fingers through his hair in the process.

"It wasn't your fault… You were pressured into it. Hell, I might have even done the same thing in your situation, so try not to beat yourself up over it..." Shikamaru attempted to soothe him.

"I could have fought back, but I didn't want to hurt them. I never wanted to hurt *anybody*. If I had, then they would all be right about me. What was I *supposed* to do? I feel like such an idiot right now…" Naruto started going off onto a tangent, tears falling from his eyes.

Shikamaru gently placed a hand on each of his shoulders to get his focus. "Hey, listen to me... You haven't done anything wrong… You just didn't know how to react, and that's okay."

For a moment, Naruto considered his words, unable to speak. Slowly, he found himself leaning forward and placing his forehead on Shikamaru's shoulder to hide his face. Shikamaru was taken aback by his actions, but slowly reached his arms up around his neck to hug him.

"...Shikamaru…, is freezing up really that normal…?" Naruto asked in a strained voice as he remembered what Tsunade had told him as well, that the same thing had happened to her as well.

"Yeah, it's actually more common than you might think…" Shikamaru said in a low, but reassuring voice, clutching at the fabric of Naruto's hospital robe to contain his rage towards the people who would have done such a thing to him. "And also… Naruto…? You're not the monster that others say you are, so please… don't *ever* think that you deserved that…"

After saying that, Shikamaru felt a pain in his chest when he heard another sob escape Naruto's lips.

…

"Self-harm and Endorphins, huh…? I wonder…"

Since she had had some free time before she had to go see Tsunade, Sakura had went to the library, hoping to find some books on self-harm. She was a fast reader, so she'd able to learn quite a bit about different types of self-harm, especially when they were associated with trauma and abuse.

But something that really caught her eye was the mention of endorphins.

"It says here that when a person is injured or stressed, endorphins get released into the brain… Endorphins are neurotransmitters that come from the pituitary gland and hypothalamus. So these chemicals… They attach themselves to opioid receptors and carry out signals across the nervous system, reducing the amount of pain one feels. Wait, that would mean they act similarly to morphine…

"Endorphins are also released during pleasurable activities like exercise, acupuncture and massages. They're considered 'feel-good chemicals' because they help one feel better and put them in a positive state of mind… Releasing endorphins is the body's way of continuing to function by blocking out nerve cells that receive the pain signals.

"Additionally, endorphins also boost the release of dopamine, another neurotransmitter that affects a person's mood... Somebody who has a lack of endorphins will frequently show signs of depression, and that would be because of low levels of dopamine… I think I get it now…"

Sakura had skimmed another book on self-harm earlier that day, and it talked about how some people who cut themselves reported feeling a certain "rush" from it.

"That 'rush' must be because of the sudden release of endorphins. Apparently, endorphins can also lessen symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as improve self-esteem… So if that's true, then I wonder if this could have any correlation with alcohol abuse and narcotics as well…"

If only Konohagakure had some kind of treatment center for people, especially children, with mental health issues like this, then so many of these problems could be prevented or stopped early on and their trauma could be worked through instead of them being left to have to bottle things up.

Both Naruto and Sasuke had been through so much. If only there was something more she could do to help them.

Sasuke's clan being massacred.

Naruto being ostracized by the village.

Sasuke's trauma-fueled bursts of rage.

The Yondaime sealing the Kyuubi inside of Naruto.

Orochimaru planting the strange mark on Sasuke's neck.

Naruto's self-harming.

The sexual assault.

Sakura wanted more than anything to take away the pain they were feeling right now.

And it wasn't just them anymore. There were so many other orphans and kids with psychological issues like these *everywhere* that *needed* that extra support. That way they wouldn't have to suffer as long as Naruto and Sasuke had. Even Inari from Nani no Kuni came to mind.

A treatment center.

Some sort of… *mental health clinic.*

"That's it!"

Sakura internally beamed at the idea of it, finding all the more incentive to train under Tsunade and become a full fledged medical ninja. There was still a lot of research and hard work she needed to do yet, but with time, give or take another 5-10 years, it was definitely something she could at least look forward to.

In the meantime, I just need to focus on supporting Naruto and Sasuke-kun...

With that thought in mind, she picked up the books she'd been reading and decided to check them out, as well as one on sexual abuse. Only then did she realize how late it had gotten.

Fighting off a sudden wave of dizziness, she left the library. Sakura forced herself to ignore the pangs of hunger, which had been bothering her on and off over the past couple of days, and headed straight to the Hokage's mansion.

…

Knock. Knock.

"Enter." Tsunade looked up from some paperwork she was signing when she heard the knock.

The door opened. It was Iruka. A couple hours after leaving the hospital, he'd decided it was best he still report back to her first even if he'd been told to get some rest. Besides, there was something else entirely that had been bothering him ever since Sakura had left the hospital that morning.

"Hokage-sama, I came back here to report about Naruto."

"So how is he…?" Tsunade asked.

"Sasuke and Sakura came to visit him earlier, and he's doing pretty well. He also used the marker I gave him, but if possible, I think he also should try to find some other coping mechanisms to see if anything else might work for him too, because I'm worried that's not going to be enough." Iruka expressed his concerns. "After all, what helped me might not help him."

"Try not to worry so much, alright? Those are all things we can discuss with him in time. And I imagine Shikamaru has an idea or two that could help him as well." Tsunade smiled a bit.

"Shikamaru was one of the few classmates that never treated Naruto differently when they were kids, so I'm glad you chose him rather than somebody else." Iruka admitted.

"Speaking of which, has Naruto told you anything else about people who have been assaulting him?" Tsunade asked, already guessing the answer.

"No, he hasn't really wanted to talk about it since last night when he spoke to you." Iruka explained.

"I see… My guess is Naruto probably feels ashamed for it." Tsunade mused aloud. "Being put in a situation like that can be hard for anybody, and sexual assault victims will often blame themselves when it wasn't even their fault. Many have gone *years* without telling anybody just because they're afraid of being judged for it. The only thing we can do right now is support him and hope he'll soon open up to us enough to tell us about their identities…"

"...Right." Iruka mumbled solemnly, wishing he could do more to help his former student.

Tsunade looked down at some of her papers, thinking it over.

"Even so… If they've been doing that to Naruto, then there's a high chance they've done it to other kids as well… I wonder, should I get Inoichi involved…? He might at least be able to get their physical description from Naruto's memories... No, I need to wait a bit longer. Still, this is bad..."

Once again, the temptation hit her to use a third party for getting the information from him that she needed, but if possible, she'd rather not have to go that route, and yet... the very *idea* of letting *sex offenders* wander lose in the village wasn't exactly something she could risk for long. Something needed to be done, and *soon*.

"By the way, there was something I wanted to ask you. Would you be interested in taking up a temporary guardianship over Naruto?" Tsunade eyed him.

There was a pause before the meaning of the question really dawned on him.

"...*G-Guardianship*? Hold on, you don't mean like *adoption,* do you?" Iruka was taken aback by the suggestion, not having expected to be given such a proposition at all.

"I suppose you could say it's something like that, more or less. I'd rather not have Naruto stay at the hospital any longer than he has to, but with the situation as it is, I can't allow him to go back to the place he's been living at." Tsunade explained. "It's not just him hurting himself I'm worried about anymore. If I send him back home now, there's a huge risk that whatever's been going on between him and those villagers will only continue to happen until something is done about it. Either way, I would rather have him be with somebody he feels comfortable with, and what I've heard from Kakashi, you're the closest person Naruto has to a father."

Admittedly, it wasn't just that. Not only was Naruto a minor, but if the counsel caught wind of the fact that he had been hurting himself, there was no telling how they'd react. Homura and Koharu saw Naruto as a liability and would be just as happy locking him away somewhere. That was the *last* thing Tsunade wanted for him.

Upon hearing her words, Iruka was left speechless for a moment, trying to process everything. For a long time, he'd always thought of Naruto as being like family to him, but *this*?

It was so sudden.

"...I-I don't know what to say… I don't have a problem letting him stay with me, but what about my class? I have a job to consider." Iruka pointed out, wanting to know exactly what he was getting himself into. If he had to put his career as a teacher on hold to help Naruto get back on his feet, he would do so without question, but-

"You don't need to worry about that." Tsunade said, putting his worries at ease. "If everything goes as planned, looking after him won't even be an issue. I'm thinking after about a week or so, Naruto will probably want to start going on missions again, and, as long as he starts using his coping mechanisms, you can sleep whenever you want. I'll just have somebody he trusts come meet up with him in the mornings and vise versa in the evenings. How does that sound?"

"Alright… Then do you have an idea how long this arrangement will last…?" Iruka wanted to know. He knew she'd said it was temporary but that wasn't that telling.

"Well, that all depends on Naruto. If he's willing to cooperate and give us the names of the people who have been assaulting him, then I'll personally take care of the situation myself and he'll be free to return home whenever." Tsunade explained.

"Alright." Iruka said, thinking it over. "I should probably ask him about it first, but otherwise he can stay with me as long as he needs to."

"Glad to hear it. I'll set up arrangements and hopefully have him discharged by tomorrow evening some time." Tsunade smiled.

"Thank you. Also, um, there was something else I came here to talk with you about, if that's okay." Iruka asked permission, not wanting to waste much more of her time.

"Yes, what is it?" Tsunade encouraged him to speak.

"It's about Sakura…" Iruka swallowed, feeling uneasy at even having to speak about this. He began to fidget with his pants leg. "...I think somebody may have hurt her. I noticed she had some bruises earlier, which were mainly on her face and arms. She claimed that they were from a fall, but I feel like she was hiding something. I figured you would be able to heal her when she got here."

He had always had an underlying gentle nature about him, as well as a strong sense of what was right and wrong. He could never just stand back and let a child be hurt within his knowledge.

Sure, there was always the off chance that Sakura's injuries were from some training accident, but her behavior alone was a dead give away that something else entirely was going on, topped with her poor physical appearance and how pale she was.

"Bruises, huh…? Come to think of it, something similar happened last week as well…" Tsunade noted, before cupping a finger over her chin.

"Whoever it was must have done it to her some time after she left my office last night…"

She looked back up at Iruka.

"Tell me, you wouldn't happen to know if she has a history of any kind of abuse, would you…?" She asked, following simple procedure to gather the facts she needed so she could get a better idea of exactly what she was working with, or if find out she needed more information.

"No, not that I'm aware of… But you could ask Yamanaka Ino. They've been fairly close ever since they were little kids, so she might know something I don't." Iruka explained.

"I see…" Tsunade mulled it over. *"Inoichi's daughter, huh? At the very least, she might be worth keeping in mind…"*

"Well, in any case, thank you for telling me. You can leave Sakura to me. Just go get some rest already." She dismissed him with a small smile.

"Right. I'll take my leave now." Iruka bowed before exiting the room. After that, Tsunade was once again left alone with her thoughts.

"First Naruto, and now Sakura...?" She bit her thumbnail, trying to calm herself. *"Is it possible she was targeted because of her connection to Naruto...?"*

While the assumption may have seemed to come out of nowhere, as Hokage she had to look at things objectively in a situation like this and carefully consider all possibilities, no matter how far-fetched they may have seemed.

She sighed. *"Well, whatever… The only thing I can do right now is wait until she gets here to talk with her myself, which should be any minute now."*

Tsunade decided to take the rest of the time to finish organizing some paperwork on her desk, the mess only serving to amplify her plummeting mood.

…

Sure enough, it wasn't even ten minutes before Sakura arrived with an armful of books in her hands.

"Hokage-sama, I'm here for our training, as per your orders… " she said, nervously, after Tsunade had told her to come in.

"Oh, Sakura, I'm glad you could make it! Just give me a moment to adjust these papers, alright?" The woman greeted her, beaming.

"Of course, take your time… Don't mind me." Sakura sheepishly waved her hand, not wanting to intrude. She took the time to place the books down on the floor, making sure they were neatly stacked so she could come back for them later.

She then approached Tsunade, who had accidentally dropped some papers on the floor.

"Wait, Let me get them for you!" Sakura politely insisted, bending down to pick them up before holding them out for her. "Here you are."

"Thank you." Tsunade took the papers with a smile, but upon closer inspection, couldn't help but momentarily frown at the swelling on her face and arms. It was as Iruka said, definitely not from a fall.

"It's no problem, really. Also, if there's anything else you need help with, I don't mind." Sakura offered. "It's the least I can do for asking you to train me…"

"No, I think it'll be fine for now. I'll just have Shizune take care of the rest in the meantime..." Tsunade said, placing the pile of papers down in a neat stack on the desk. "Now, before we begin, I'd like to have a word with you. It's about these bruises of yours.
Somebody *hit* you, *didn't* they?"

She reached up towards Sakura's cheek, but retracted her hand a bit when the girl flinched as if she was going to be hit. Tsunade softened her expression. "Relax, I'm just going to heal you."

Sakura felt embarrassed afterwards, but couldn't help it. She'd been on edge ever since being struck by Mibuki.

"O-oh, sorry… I guess I got startled for a second there… Hahaha…." Sakura looked away, feeling embarrassed by her reaction.

"No, it's fine… But, Sakura, I need you to be honest with me.… Who was it that did this to you…?" Tsunade wanted to know, once again holding her hand towards her face. This time, Sakura didn't pull away, allowing her to reach back out again towards her face. A green light glowed under her right eye.

"...It was nobody… It's like I told Iruka-sensei earlier, I fell..." she couldn't even look her in the eye.

Tsunade saw through it immediately. "You don't have to hide it from me, you know. I can already tell that your wounds aren't from some accident… If somebody's been hurting you, you need to *tell* one of us…"

"No, I…" Sakura saw no point in trying to hide it any further after that. Tsunade clearly didn't believe her, and trying to lie any further at this point would just make her seem desperate. She looked down, fidgeting with her hands. "It's not like that… I know she's not a bad person… She just doesn't understand me..."

It seemed like a flimsy argument, but down deep, Sakura still cared for Mibuki and couldn't bring herself to tell Tsunade it was her own mother who'd hurt her, nor about the toxic environment she'd been living in for years.

"Alright… Let me ask you something… The person who did this…, it wouldn't happen to be the same person who hit you last week as *well*, would it?" Tsunade questioned, as she moved to healing the bruises on her arm.

"...Yeah, but that was my fault…! I said something that made her angry, so I was basically asking for it…" Sakura insisted, trying to sound convincing despite not actually having any apologies for what she had said regarding Naruto. Quickly, she changed the subject not wanting to linger on it any further. "Anyway…, thank you, Hokage-sama… For healing me, I mean… I feel a lot better now…"

Upon hearing her response, Tsunade knew she wasn't going to get a straight answer so she decided to drop the discussion for now, gently stroking the top of her head with a smirk. "Well, I couldn't just allow my newly appointed apprentice to waltz around with bruises all over her, could I? I'm just glad you're okay now."

A warmth entered Sakura's chest at the gesture.

"Come on, follow me." Tsunade said as she headed towards the door.

"R-Right! Just let me get my books." Sakura said excitedly, picking up her pile of books and following after her.

As they were walking, Tsunade caught a glance of the titles on one of the books.

"Oh, I see you're reading about self-harm. Is it because of Naruto?" She asked out of curiosity, but also having an idea of what she was going through.

"Yeah. I felt bad for not being able to do more to help him, so I started doing some research on it." Sakura explained. "Apparently, when a person hurts themselves, it releases endorphins, which are kind of like a natural pain reliever created within the brain. But they're released during other things like exercise as well, so I figured it would be a good idea to find alternative stress relief methods that might work for him… And also…"

"Hm?" Tsunade rose an eyebrow, urging her to continue.

"...One day… I'd like to open up a mental health clinic here in the village so other orphans and kids can get help for things like this and even trauma support in general." Sakura said. "That way… they wouldn't have to suffer as long as Naruto and Sasuke-kun had to. I just… want to make some kind of difference for the people around me."

Tsunade was a bit surprised to say the least but she smiled nonetheless. "Well, I think that's a wonderful goal to work towards, Sakura. As long as you stay focused, I believe you'll make a fine medical ninja one day and, in doing so, you could achieve just about anything you set your mind to."

"You really think so…?" Sakura's face became a bit flushed but she was genuinely happy to hear her new teacher's praise and encouragement. "I was worried I was being too overzealous about it or something…"

If it had been Mibuki, she would have come up with every possible reason for her *not* to work towards such a goal, tell her why it wouldn't work out or say that she couldn't handle it, etc. But Tsunade didn't think she was being delusional at all, she actually *believed* in her.

"Nonsense, I think it's good that you have an idea of what you want to do with your life, just like Naruto already has his sights set on becoming Hokage…" As she spoke, Tsunade allowed the corners of her lips to tug upwards.

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"Wait, I have to read all this…?!" Sakura exclaimed, gawking at the large pile of books that Tsunade had just placed before her. They were now standing in a room favoring a library. Numerous shelves containing books and scrolls lined the walls. In the middle of the room stood a couch as well as a table, which Tsunade had put the books on top of.

"What's wrong, Sakura? You're not getting discouraged, are you?" Tsunade smirked, folding her arms as she sensed her hesitation.

"No, I'll do it." Sakura said with determination, fully prepared to take on whatever task she had to.

"I know it may seem like a lot, but I need you to have all the basics down pat before we move onto the actual training, and it's as I warned you before. This is not going to be easy. However, I trust you'll come to me if you have any questions, right?"

"Y-yes, ma'am." Sakura said, before looking down sheepishly. "Also, um, if it's alright with you…, I'd like to address you as my teacher…"

Given Tsunade was the Hokage, her nervousness made sense. But Tsunade didn't mind at all.

"Well, you *are* going to be my apprentice now, so go right ahead. Besides, anything is better than what Naruto calls me." Tsunade scoffed a bit, wanting Sakura to go with what felt the most comfortable to her.

"Okay, thank you…" Sakura hesitated a bit. "Tsunade-shishou…"

"Don't mention it." Tsunade chuckled a bit. "Now, hurry and get to those books, already. You've got a lot of studying to do."

"Right." Sakura, with a new boost of confidence, didn't even think twice before opening one of the books from the pile and sitting down on the couch.

Tsunade observed the girl with a growing fondness, before receiving a painful reminder of just how malnourished she looked. "Stay right here. There's something I need to take care of, but I should be back in a bit."

…

Sakura had become so invested in the book she was reading that she didn't even notice when Tsunade had come back in and sat down next to her. That was until a water bottle and some

sort of protein bar obstructed her line of vision.

Tsunade appeared to be munching on something herself as well. "Here, I want you to eat this when you get a chance. You look pale."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't. I actually just ate before coming here." Sakura lied, politely declining the offer, but took the water bottle. "Besides, I'm kinda on a diet right now..."

Despite the burning sensation in her stomach, she knew she'd feel even worse afterward if she *did* choose to eat it. Fortunately, she'd learned that drinking water sometimes helped curb her appetite.

"A diet? Well, just keep it with you in case you get hungry." Tsunade's eyebrows furrowed, getting a bad feeling that there was something more to this than just that. Unfortunately, without any absolute proof to back up her suspicions, it wasn't like she could force her to eat if she didn't want to, so instead she decided that keeping a close eye on her was her best option she had at the moment.

"I will. Thank you." Sakura put the packaged bar on the couch beside her and, after getting a few sips of water, turned her attention back to the book in her lap.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long after that that her hands began to tremble.

"No… Not this again. And why now *of all times?"* She glared at her body, cursing her stomach for being so *needy*.

Hypoglycemia and her idea of diets had never meshed well to begin with, but this was straight up *annoying*.

She could only hope Tsunade hadn't noticed it.

But Tsunade was a medical expert. Of course she noticed.

…

A/N: Until next chapter, whenever that is ahhh going back to work this weekend hope y'all like what there was. Also, I'm not sure how many knew but in the novels, Sakura, with Ino's help, opened up various mental health clinics around the world to help orphans and kids with psychological issues and trauma. I thought it'd be cool to incorporate that into my writing.

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